



Goldenteryl.

Lumi-chan!

Published: 2023

Read plz~

All right, I shouldn't explain anything about this fic to readers who have already read the context, which is basically the prologue of this entire thing which explained how things happened, the reincarnation, the slice of life, the happiness, the joy, the sadness, the despair-- yk, all that good stuff! :D

But to the new people who know nothing about me or the things I've written (which is quite good for u, so pls dont check my other works--) while I'm not forcing you to read anything else, I will encourage you to read this short little series i made in my oneshots book which served as the prologue for this thing.

The link is righhhhttt hereeeee....

<https://www.wattpad.com/1341827096-cote-random-oneshots-goldenberyl-1>

If the link doesn't work, then just go to my profile, click my book titled " Cote Random Oneshots!" and then scroll down till u see the Goldenberyl series and start from part 1 till u finish up to the Epilogue.

Again, you don't have to do this if you feel like you don't need to. But I'm encouraging it so that it'll hopefully immerse you more into the experience of reading this. Additionally, if you don't know any COTE characters then just uh.....bear with me--

For those that DO know the cote characters but have not read the Goldenberyl Prologue series, then hopefully you do. If not, then prepare to see a more different Kiyotaka, not too OOC but I think the way I've written him would still leave a distinct persona if you're unprepared.

Keep in mind, this fic will mostly follow Oshi no Ko's rules, with a sprinkle of certain COTE elements to add up to the

story, but essentially this still follows Oshi no Ko canon anime/manga. HOWEVER! The early chapters will serve as a seperate storyline that would eventually tie in with Oshi no Ko canon, so expect my take on an original " side quest " for this fic's protagonist, " Goldenberyl ", so that he could shine without stealing any of Aqua and Ruby's original spotlight.

And lastly...

Don't be suprised if this fic gets dropped~

The viewers that have stuck with me all this time definitely knows what I mean by that :)

Anyways, see you in the first official chapter.....which is also a prologue--

See ya~

0. Revenge.

" Revenge is the raging fire that consumes the arsonist... "

- **Max Lucado**

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*It was a day with a grey and dreary atmosphere. Or maybe that's how the lone person perceived it as, after standing in front of the very thing she dreaded above anything else. Tears rolled down her eyes, but her expression remained stoic as it could. Her hands wanted to destroy everything around her, but that would not change its numbness.*

*Her heart wanted to break, and maybe it did, but if so then why is she still here? The reminder that her heart is still beating, that her lungs were still breathing, that she could still see, hear, smell, and taste that bitterness welling up like vile up her throat. She hated it.*

*"...They didn't even...." Her tone shakes as he hangs her head low, " They didn't even give him a proper burial..." A rushed grave buried near a hill was all that's left to remember his existence. The name, "**Ayanokoji Kiyotaka**", engraved on the stone with haste.*

*" That's to be expected of a white room student's disposal." A man who stood beside her this entire time, spoke in a somber manner. " Even if he was the masterpiece, it was only a title that could be placed unto anyone who can exhibit the same feats or better. There was no privilege provided in that facility, not even to him."*

*" The two years...I didn't get to see him..." Her knees could barely hold her own weight, " How...it shouldn't be...."*

*" He was stronger than everyone else....he was....the strongest....so how....how did he..."*

*The heaviness overwhelmed her, she fell on her knees as the tears flowed freely down her face and to the ground beneath her.*

*" It's cruel...so cruel..." She spoke, almost incoherent. " It's unfair...so unfair!"*

*The man glances at her with pity in his eyes. He had taken her in as his daughter after she'd been released from the curriculum due to failure, he spent the last two years together with her trying to undo all the horrible things the white room has done to her mind. And even if most were dispelled eventually, one person remained constant in that head of hers. The man has long given up trying to make her forget about that anomaly.*

*Ayanokoji Kiyotaka meant so much to her.*

*She loved him.*

*But from what he can tell, those words were never truly said after their departure.*

*Her love was in vain, and an anomaly in itself. How could she love someone after being born under that type of facility? How could she continue to love someone who shunned her away when she begged him to stay. Yes, he remembers that day, when the boy was asked to visit her at the mental rehab because she constantly asked for his presence, the man couldn't find it in himself to refuse her any longer. Even if the result was to be expected based on the rumors about the boy, he arranged one last meeting.*

*It didn't go well. She never got the chance to say the words she needed to.*

*All that's left is regret...*

*But if not regret,*

*Then...*

*" I'll make all of them pay..." She whispered to herself with clenched fists. " That man....that facility..."*

*When she turned to face him. He was stunned by the fiery flames*

*emanating from her amethyst coloured eyes.*

***" I'll destroy all of it."***

*She spoke with such heaviness in tone, and he couldn't find a single lie from her words. Only resolve. Fueled by the despair and anger upon seeing her dead companion's burial, left unhonored and forgotten, the grim feeling in her heart ready to burst and strangle that had wronged him, to imprison all of them in collective torment with her need for justice.*

*If not regret in her heart...then it was surely...*

***Revenge.***

*A dangerous flame that can never be satiated until her goal is met. Uncaring of how many people it burns along the way, till the one thing she despises the most finally disappears into ashes.*

*" I'll let the world know...what that place has done to me....to everyone....to him....." She wipes away her tears as all the memories played like a slide show in her mind.*

*" But I can't do it alone...." She stands up. " Would you....help me, Father?"*

*He purses his lips. Her ambition was dangerous to herself, she wanted to war with an organization backed up and funded by a branch of the Japanese government and the support of an 'upstanding' politician. The chances of destroying something with that much power sounded like a faraway dream with the least chance of success.*

*Yuki is still young, and at the age of 16. She could be living a normal life like all the girls her age should. Go to school, hang with her friends, or maybe they could even travel to other parts of the world with all the money he's got. So that she could see it. See everything the White Room covered from her.*

*But he knows.....he knows, and painfully so, that Yuki's heart won't sway now. She was dead-set on doing the impossible, even if it might result in her demise along the way. She won't stop. If he denies her*



*assistance, then the stubborn girl would find other means to enact her plan.*

*"I'll gladly help you." The man smiled.*

*Even if he was not smart as her, or as physically proficient as her.*

*He'll choose to stand by her side. She was his daughter, after all.*

*And he will not let his daughter be scorched by her own flames.*

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(15 years later...)

It was a Saturday afternoon, and the newly renovated ' StrawBeryl ' cafe was bustling with patrons. With the populace consisting of high school girls, and while many would assume the place was famous for its sweet and balanced desserts, warm pastries, or some great coffee then you'd quickly find their assumptions wrong!

No, the Cafe wasn't famous for that at all. Rarely do boys ever come here, and those that did come have quickly learned their lesson that it wasn't worth the time due to the line constantly sucking out every male entity's patience. And this cafe was also infamous for those with girlfriends-- the number one rule for a boyfriend is to *never* bring their girlfriends to this cafe. It's a sure-fire way to put a strain on the relationship, ya know! (The staff even put a warning sign at the door due to a couple drastic situations that took place during the first few weeks...)

" Hey, Beryl! Serve this up to the lady with the laptop." The barista calls for the boy.

" Hm? Sure." Beryl heads over to retrieve the readied tray, but along the way, he had to once again endure the stares he received ever since he started working here. He'd been hit up a few times by their regular female customers, all of which he politely rejected.

He just has to endure a few more weeks before the hype would eventually die down...

Soon, his plan for working here would finally ignite, with more variety of customers finding themselves comfort here as well. This was all to achieve his own hidden purpose. Once he collected the tray, he carefully maneuvered through the groups of girls, gently telling to step aside so he could pass, and luckily enough they were compliant.

" I believe this is your order, erm..." Beryl checks the name before glancing at the woman again. " Sagami-san, correct?"

Upon closer inspection, he realized that the woman was seemingly disguising herself with the amount of clothes she was wearing, her hair was hidden under her cap, and she was wearing shades and a black facemask. He could only see little skin from her, that being her hands, but the gloves were put aside. It caught his curiosity.

" Yes, that would be me." She spoke softly, but womanly. Her tone was graceful as if it were practiced constantly. " Thank you." She slides off her mask and shoots him a small smile.

" It's my pleasure." He politely says before placing down her strawberry shortcake and coffee. " Please enjoy."

" Thank you, I will, um..." She pauses, staring at his name tag, before looking at him again. " Beryl?" She said as if it were a question.

He wasn't suprised, he's dealt with this first impression plenty of times...

" Yes, that is my name. Though, it's just a nickname for Goldenberyl." He explained.

She raises a visible brow. " Goldenberyl?" sounding even more, perplexed.

"My mother named me." He said. " I know it may come off as a strange naming sense but--"

" No, it's quite unique. Never in my life would I have thought to

meet a person named Goldenberyl." She interrupts with an amused giggle, " Tell me, does this name have anything to do with the name of the cafe?"

" Ah...well, yes...." Beryl's stoic demeanor fell off for a moment, a bit ashamed to admit that horrible fact. " It's embarrassing, I swear I had nothing to do with that. It's the owner..."

" It's business." She adds, " I don't blame the owner for it." You just gotta do what you gotta do.

Whoever the owner is, they must be swimming in profit from all the attention this kid's been getting... Yuki muses.

" Beryl! Help! These girls are going crazy over here!" The female register begged from the other side.

" Ah, that's my cue to leave." He realizes, to which Yuki responds with a laugh, waving at him.

" You should go then. Wouldn't want your co-worker to die in a place like this, would you?" She said.

" *BERRRYLLL--!*"

" Suppose I don't." He shrugs but then he drops his tray accidentally.

" Oh gosh!" Yuki was suprised, and Beryl quickly bend down to pick it up.

" Sorry, I lost my grip there...." He apologizes, but his eyes discreetly glanced at her laptop screen.

Hm...nothing of interest, he concludes upon seeing that it was open on a normal window. The woman looked suspicious to him, so he thought that she might be doing something that could possibly provide him clues. He's seen this woman typing away on her laptop plenty of times since the cafe opened, and it's only now that he was given the opportunity to serve her instead of the usual waitress who would come by to bring her what she ordered.

He thought her to be some sort of....stalker....

But it doesn't seem to be the case with how she's acting. Though, he should still remain vigilant of her. Until he finds out her occupation or any credentials that could answer his suspicions of her, he will remain wary.

Slowly getting up, he shoots her a small smile he practiced over the years with Ruby's help.

" I'll get going now, but before that, if you're okay with it. May I ask your name since you know mine?" He made his first move.

" Sure." She nods, " Yuki. It's Sagami Yuki."

Yuki...? That name rung a bell in his head for a moment, but he continues with his act.

" Pleasure to meet you. I'm Hoshino Goldenberyl." He introduces himself with a bow, " I'll excuse myself now."

Yuki nods with a smile before resuming with her work whilst enjoying her coffee and snack.

Meanwhile, the name keeps ringing in Beryl's head.

I shouldn't be thinking about it too much, it may not be the person I think it is...and I doubt we'd ever cross paths again, He thinks to himself as he recalls a memory of a certain girl in his past life.

The name is common anyways, He had to put that in the highest consideration before assuming things. Besides, all he could recall of her were just a few stray memories, but it would be a lie for him to say that he wouldn't enjoy the chance of meeting her again. Just to see if she was doing alright.

But that's just a thought. He shouldn't stray himself too deep into it.

He still has a purpose to achieve in this life.

One of them being **revenge**.

And he'll do whatever it takes to achieve it. For his mother.

Even if he's scorched by his own flames.

~~~ End ~~~

Okay, the prologue ends here.

Hopefully it managed to attract your attention! If i feel like it, I might write and publish the next chapter later in the day....

It might seem slow now, but I'll do my best to quicken the pace while also not making it look bad. Yuki's motivations are revealed in this chapter, and the two of them finally met after all these years-- though they know nothing of each other.

The next few chapters will be slice of life! ( for the time being ;D )

Also quick question; As a person who hasn't read the manga, does everyone that interacts with the Hoshino twins know they're Ai's children? For example, Kana ( in the anime ) did she connect the dots?

Cuz in the previous goldenberyl series in my oneshot book. I made it so that they're referred to as ' Saitou ' following Miyako and Ichigo's family name to keep cover. Since it's said that the kid's names were transferred into their family register, so I thought it only makes sense that they be referred to as such.

I want to amend that part and start referring to them as ' Hoshino' now, instead.

Anyways, see ya and hope you look forward~

# 1. Dreams

" HOLD FAST TO DREAMS, FOR IF DREAMS DIE, LIFE IS A BROKEN-  
WINGED BIRD THAT CANNOT FLY. "

- Langston Hughes

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" Honestly, I feel like I'll get a good response!" Ruby said, beaming with positivity as she showcases to her friends her hope-filled eyes. " I didn't meet the application requirements last time, and I've been waiting two years for this audition!"

It was a long and painful wait for Hoshino Ruby. She recalls the deep sadness she felt when she first learned that applying to become an idol isn't a straight process, there were documents that were needed, and a certain age requirement to boot! It took a while to procure all the necessary requirements for the application, those two years really tested her patience, but now it should pay off....

" I'm sure you'll get it." Her friend supports, " You're cute, plus you're a good dancer." She elaborates, causing Ruby's heart to flutter.

" Aw, thank you--"

" It totally makes up for your shortcoming in singing too!" She adds.

" Yes, yes..." Ruby was nodding her head...

" Wait....' shortcoming ' ?" She blinked in confusion.

" I agree, if anyone has enough appeal to make up for her so-so singing, then it's definitely Ruby." Her other friend chimed.

*So-so singing?!* Ruby was flustered, and not in a good way. Shaking her head, she puffs her cheeks offended and releases a short ' hmph' while crossing her arms.

" Anyway, I'll definitely succeed with this idol audition!" She huffed before smiling confidently to the sky beyond the classroom window.

A lone thought lingers, *I'll become a top idol just like mom was!* She believes.



Her friends smirk, amused at her confidence. It's not like they didn't have faith in her, but it was much more fun to tease her since she makes the most, in their words, 'adorable' expressions.

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Ruby was currently sipping on a milk drink for calcium as she flipped through the idol magazine. It showcased a lot of popular ones today, and also rising stars, she was smiling to herself as she thought about becoming one of them entices her heart. The image of Ai floats in her mind and she clenches a fist, saying to herself.

"I'm gonna be like Mama--"

A notebook slaps her on the head.

"Ouch!" She immediately recoils, not in pain but from shock.

"Talking about your dreams is fine, but high school entrance exams are coming up." Recognizing that voice, she immediately pouts at the person who dared smack her pretty head with his study notebook.

But then she smirks, pushing away his notebook and waving her hand dismissively as she smugly says, "You don't get it, Aqua."

He looks at her with a raised brow.

"I am gonna be an idol, you hear?" She laughs maniacally. "High schools with performing arts departments only focus on the interview. They only look in academic passing ability. If I become an idol, I won't *need* to study for entrance exams." She winks. "And just like that-- I hit two birds with one stone!"

"Don't gamble your life on that little factoid." Aqua doesn't hesitate to cut her down a peg. Her joy halts as she pouts and glances at him with the side-eye.

"You know, I'm fine if you dream of being an idol. But don't go having illusions about being an idol." He sighs.

"Essentially, their salary is low. They retire before they reach 30. And their daily lives are under constant scrutiny by their fans." He

decides to remind her of the reality again. " Only a small percentage survive in the industry after graduating, and by the end most of them just pick up another line of work."

" There are very few jobs where the cost is disproportionate to the return."

" What's your point?" Ruby discerned through his act, narrowing her eyes at him.

" Isn't life about doing what you want with it? " She challenged. " You'll never do a thing if all you worry about is cost and return." She flared.

" Some people go their whole lives unable to really do anything, you know?"

As she said that, she felt her heart pang a little from the memory. Her words held extra weight because she was exactly that person in her past life. Unable to do anything she wanted to do. Always limited by her disability. She didn't care if Aqua knew her circumstance or not, nor does it matter if she tells him-- but she doesn't want Aqua to control her life and decisions. He should know that he has no right to.

" That's not for me." *Not anymore*, she thinks. Staring at her older brother with eyes that implied she wasn't going to back down.

Aqua eventually sighs.

" Do as you like," He turns around. "I'm heading to the director's place."

Ruby's eyes followed Aqua's figure, her face forming a frown upon seeing how much her brother had changed since the death of their mother. Always having a gloomy face, and never seems to have fun with life. She could relate the former to another person that's close to them, but unlike that certain person, it seemed like Aqua was losing every reason to smile or be optimistic come recent times. He'd closed himself off, keeping his doings to himself, and nobody really knows what he's up to.

Ruby would ask him what he's been doing at the director's place, but he always kept his answers vague or completely dismisses her

questions at once. She just hopes he wasn't up to anything sketchy.

Plenty other things changed since then too,

Ichigo, the former CEO of Strawberry productions suddenly cut off all contact with them, after which Miyako took over the position for the time being.

B-Komachi also disbanded after losing their star, Hoshino Ai, and with that Strawberry Productions no longer holds an idol department whatsoever for the last two years. The business shifted to managing internet personalities instead.

And another drastic change....in a similar manner to Aqua, but the opposite...

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" I'm home..." A tall body walks through the door, struggling to fight back a visible yawn.

" Beryl." Ruby perks up, standing up and walking over towards him. " You look tired." She said, amused.

" 'Cause I am." He groggily answers. " Where's Miyako-san and Aqua?" He asked, his golden browns scouring the room for their presence after not sensing any.

" Miyako-san is currently at the office, she'll come back home later than usual." Ruby informs, " As for Aqua? Well, you already know..." She said, shrugging.

" Director's place?" He asked.

" Director's place." She confirms.

" Figures." He drops his bag and lets his body sink into the comfortable couch.

" How was your application to that cafe Miyako-san recommended to you?" Ruby asked, a bit curious.

" It went well." He pauses before his face visibly droops. " Too well, even."

" Eh?" Ruby tilts her head, confused. " Is something wrong about that?"

" Rather not talk about it..." He doesn't wish to go into detail how hectic the day was with the female customers he instantly attracted in a matter of a few hours since he began work. He skipped school so he could get a proper handle on the job, but thinking back on it now, he kinda wished he'd stayed in school instead.

" And you? You applied to that idol agency, right?" He cranks his head to her, " How'd that go?"

Ruby smiles. " I should be receiving a call in a few days regarding my acceptance or not. But I'm confident I'll make the cut!" She said, bumping her fist to her chest.

" I'd be genuinely suprised if they actually accepted a gorilla like you." He hums. " Sign of the times by then, I guess--"

She hits his face with a pillow.

*" Drop dead!"*

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[A few days later...]

It was currently night time again, a Saturday night. Ruby was scrolling through her feeds, Miyako was busy sorting through important files in her laptop and making edited formats, while Beryl lied on the couch reading a book in silence. And as usual, Aqua was once again at the director's place, where he spends most of his free time since becoming the old man's apprentice.

Besides the sound of Beryl's page flipping and Miyako's audible mechanical typing. The atmosphere remained in peaceful silence....

Until Ruby decided to throw a crack at it.

" Hey, how about putting together another idol group?" Ruby nonchalantly asked as she ate a chip.

Beryl could see through his sister's disguise, she may have phrased it as a throwaway suggestion, but he knew her well enough that she was genuinely asking about it too.

" Don't say that so lightly." Miyako sighs, deciding to take a break and leaning back on her recliner seat, closing her eyes for a moment. " I'd like to if I could, you know?" She honestly answered.

Ruby was pleasantly suprised to hear that from her, but she didn't show too much of it. Still, her eyes shifted to Miyako as she continued eating her non-fat chips.

" The dream that Ai showed us wasn't an experience I can easily forget...." Miyako muses, " Even if it didn't completely succeed....she was still close. And that's what mattered."

fwip! Beryl flips to the next page.

" But before you say anything else, I'd like to make clear of a fact; that Ai was a special talent. A winning lottery." Miyako clarifies, " The longer I do this job, the more I realize that, and the more I believe miracles don't happen twice."

The older woman meets Ruby's gaze.

" The reality is that things don't always go smoothly. Either you're lucky or not, that's how life goes." She says before releasing a deep sigh. " Besides..."

" Besides what?" Ruby asked.

Miyako's eyes visibly widened in realization, she quickly scrapped it away by averting back to the screen as she picked back up her tone. " It's nothing..." She said.

fwip! Beryl flips to the next page.

" Anyways, aren't you supposed to be expecting a call about the results of your audition soon?" She changed the topic. " If you pass, then the regulation states that you should be affiliated with them, right?"

Ruby frowns upon hearing the last part, feeling a bit melancholic about *that* part of the deal. She looks back to her phone anxiously,

as much as she wanted to achieve her dream....she...

" They're a better-established agency than we ever were, no?" Miyako says.

" R...Right..." Ruby awkwardly said. " I guess that's true..."

She felt like she was betraying Strawberry Productions by doing so...

Her mother's alma mater...

Fwips! Beryl flips to the next page.

Suddenly, Ruby's phone begins to ring.

" Speak of the devil..." Miyako points out as Ruby nearly stumbles forward trying to answer the call as soon as possible. After grabbing her phone she quickly ran a short distance to the room, trying to hold back her excitement and calming down her nerves before answering the call.

" H-Hello?" She answers.

" Is this Hoshino Ruby speaking?"

"Yes, Hoshino here! " She closed her eyes.

Fwip! Beryl flips to the next page.

" Okay...."

Fwip! Beryl flips to the next page.

" Okay!"

Fwip! To the next one.

Ruby's eyes widened, losing its glimmer as the secretary's next words come to play.

" O..Okay, I see..." Her shoulders drop lower. " Thank you for the time..."

" Well then, we will be awaiting your application next time around."
The secretary said their final words before ending the call completely.

It took a while for Ruby to take the phone off her ear, she was silent. Still like a stone figure. Miyako stared at her back in worry.

" Ruby..." She calls out to her.

Ruby hugged the phone to her chest as she tried to bite back the sobs. But the tears failed to hide itself as it quickly seeped out from her jewel-like eyes like running water. Her face was flushed red, disappointment and anger for herself, she believes that she just wasn't enough to have been accepted. She was so confident...and...

" I...I didn't make it..." Her tone was heartbreaking to hear.

Warm arms slowly enveloped her finger as she felt herself being pulled back into a soft hug by Miyako. The older woman nuzzled her head behind Ruby's hair, releasing a breath before comforting her. Not with pretty words, but the truth.

" That's reality for you..." She said it, not demeaning Ruby's efforts and dream, but showing her the point she was trying to make. " There are lots of politics involved, and you can't ever expect your ability to be judged fairly."

" Not everyone can have it go as well as it did for Ai." She hugged Ruby even closer. " But you did your best..."

Beryl closes his book, and sits up. He stretches his arms a bit before setting his gaze on the sobbing Ruby. The boy thinks Miyako said the right words to appeal Ruby, but as a person who made a promise to his sister. She must know this.

" Ruby," He stands up and walks over to her. " I'm guessing things really didn't work out as smoothly as you hoped..."

" B...Beryl..." Her eyes turn to him, Beryl reaches out to wipe away her tears. Clicking his tongue inside of his mouth, he doesn't like seeing his sister's light flickering like this, he doesn't like the tears that roll down her face, at least those ones of sadness.

" Your dream to become an idol..." He softly said. " It's not an easy

road."

She nods slowly, accepting that fact. Beryl sighs before tucking away a few strands that have strayed onto his sister's teary mess.

"...Are you giving up?" He asked her, tentatively.

" I...." Beryl sees the hesitation in her eyes, he can hear it in her tone. " I don't...want to give up..." So she says, but her voice held uncertainty.

She continued to sob, and Beryl retracts his hands as she tried to cover her mouth, trying to shove her sobs back down but failing to. So all she could do was apologize for crying. She may not have said it, but Beryl can tell her ambition felt its first wavering. She feels discouraged to continue, and as much as she wants to try again, this has always been one of Ruby's shortcomings. Once she loses confidence in herself, she returns to this form of herself that wants to " run away" from it all. He recalls that day vividly back when they were still in preschool.

.....

And just like back then....he'll...

" When you have a dream you really can't let go of, you trust yourself to pursue them." Beryl suddenly said.

Ruby raises her head to look at him, sniffing away. But paying attention.

" But you've always got to remember; That real dreams take hard work, they take patience, and sometimes you've gotta dig down very deep." His tone was gentle but stern. " Unless you're willing to do that much, I don't see you achieving your dreams anytime soon."

"...." Ruby averts her eyes.

Beryl tilts her head back to face him.

" Ruby...." He grips her shoulders with gentle hands as he stares at her.

" Don't let regret take the place of your dreams."

" Try again, it's okay to fail." He tells her, " You keep trying until you can get it right. Nothing will come easy for you, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. I know you can do it."

Unlike Ai, who brimmed with unrivaled confidence, Ruby had constant anxiety dwelling within the depths of her heart. She masks it all with the same amount of confidence and optimism that Ai radiated, but when faced with an obstacle such as right now, everything gets reduced. She gets heartbroken. She gets all too reminded of her past when the result was similar, giving your best and still failing.

And honestly....she wanted to run away. Again.

Have some time for herself. Maybe that would help. That's how it always went back then.

But seeing the look in Beryl's eyes kept her grounded. He was here. He was holding her when she wanted to just let herself fall, he was here, telling her that it was okay to feel this way. He'll be here to bring her back in reality. She tries to calm herself, closing her eyes, and letting out short breaths.

" Ruby?" She could hear Miyako sounding worried for her.

"..."

Take a deep breath, Ruby....

1....

2....

3....

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*" Wah!" She slips after trying to perform the next move, and this time she wasn't ready to brace herself since it happened all too sudden.*

*She closed her eyes shut, ready to feel the sharp impact her back would make against the floor, but instead she felt gentle hands sustaining her weight.*

*" Whoa! Mama's got ya!" A voice breaks through.*

*Those same hands gently sat Ruby on the ground, the little girl slowly begins to realize and opens her eyes to meet the gaze of her mother.*

*" Are you okay?" She asked.*

*" I'm fine....I just slipped." Ruby smiles. " Thank you, Mama."*

*Ai smiles, patting her daughter's head.*

*" To prevent that from happening again, take a break, and breathe. Like this!" She points to herself, demonstrating as she slowly inhales and exhales.*

*" 1..." She starts.*

*Ruby closes her eyes and does the same.*

*" 2..." she follows.*

*" 3...." They both said.*

*A relieving exhale escapes both their lips. Opening their eyes at the same time, Ai shoots the question.*

*" Are you okay now?"*

*" Mhm!"*

*Ruby gets back up and readies herself to dance.*

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" Mhm....." Ruby says after reliving that memory.

" I'll try again..." Feeling a spark within her being, she patted her cheeks, blinking away the last bit of wetness from her eyes. " I'll definitely try again!"

" Ruby..." Miyako was suprised when Ruby suddenly turned to face her with a rejuvenated smile.

" I'll beat those stupid politics and become an idol. I won't give up, Miyako-san." She says.

Miyako wondered how she could say that when she was just crying a short while ago. The older woman thought that Ruby would waver, and be affected from this. But here she is, brimming with positivity once more, and if only for a bit-- *shining just like Ai did.*

Miyako's eyes went towards Beryl, the latter wearing a soft smile that Ruby didn't see. That's when it all clicked in the woman's head.

Unlike Aqua....

Beryl intends to support her.

For some reason, knowing that at least one of the brothers support their sister. It calmed Miyako's worries, it seems like she wasn't truly alone in that regard. She wants Ruby to succeed too, and she knows the girl's got what it takes to do just that. But she can't go in with naivety and with ideals alone....she needed to realize the reality. And now that she does....

Miyako can't help but be infected by her daughter's beautiful smile.

" I see." The woman said, softly. Ruby nods before turning to face the brother who advised her.

Miyako wanted to chuckle when she noticed how Beryl quickly wiped away the smile he had on his face when Ruby faced him. He really doesn't intend to give her the satisfaction, does he?

" Thank you." She finds herself saying, " I needed that."

Beryl nods before taking a few steps back, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

" It's no problem. No little brother can sit right with himself after seeing tears rushing out of their older sister's eyes." He said with mischief in his eyes.

" Aww, that's--" Ruby was about to fall for his lie until--

" Makes them seem more ugly than they already are."

She pauses.

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" You--!" Ruby blushes in embarrassment. " Ugh! Why did I cry in front of a heartless being like you!" She whined, quickly hugging Miyako to cope. " Why did mama birth this prick of a brother!!!"

It's not a normal day without these two finding ways to bicker...
Miyako thought.

" I'll run to the store and buy some ice cream. I was planning to do that earlier when I thought you were going to get accepted....but even if you didn't, it doesn't mean we still can't celebrate the fact you tried." Beryl turns around. " I'll buy you your favorite flavour. It was strawberry, right?"

" Oh shut up!" Ruby barked back at him, pointing at him with an accusing finger. " You're just taking advantage of your older sister's sadness just so you can have an excuse to buy convenience store ice cream! Miyako-san, stop him!"

" I'm too old for this..." Miyako exaggerates a tired sigh. Taking a small part in teasing the girl too.

" Oh come on!" Ruby pouts.

Beryl, who's back was turned on Ruby, smiled a bit in amusement.

" Well, I'll be back soon." Beryl says as he puts on his shoes.

" Live in the 7-Eleven for all I care!" Ruby fumes.

" Sure, sure..." Beryl responds with amusement as he left house.

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Aqua passes back the phone to the director's hands. " Thanks." He muttered before sitting back down on the floor and looking through some messy scripts.

Director Gotanda's eyes followed the boy's back, he takes a quick puff from his cigarette before exhaling and looking at his own copy of the manuscript.

" The fact you can fool your own twin sister shows you've got acting chops." He comments. " What're you gonna do if she gets a call from them for real?" He asked, curiously.

" I sent them a short text from Ruby's phone saying she was withdrawing. And then blocked their number with her settings." The boy answered without remorse.

"....I see." Gotanda was impressed that he was that prepared....though that raised the question...

" Why're you going to such lengths to crush your sister's dreams? She's quite a beauty, you know? I'm sure she could actually make it." He said.

" I don't need to spell it out." Aqua says, " I'm not going to let her become an idol."

He then tilts his head to meet the director's eyes, a blackness forming within the depths of his aqua-coloured orbs. As he speaks with a burning resolve.

***" I won't let her tread in Ai's steps."***

Gotanda sighs. " You really are overprotective to a fault..." Was all he had to say.

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Aqua made it clear that he doesn't intend to let Ruby become an idol.

He'll do any means necessary to make sure of that.

Bidding his goodbyes, he departed from the director's home, and headed to his own. His mind constantly returned to Ruby. He hopes hope that she's finally considered his words from earlier and select a different path, after having been " rejected " by the idol association. It might've been ruthless of him to dictate her path of life, but he couldn't care less so long as she was safe from the harm and trauma the entertainment business could give her.

Besides Ruby, the dark thoughts that swirl in Aqua's head are scenarios of finding the main culprit behind their mother's murder. All he needs is a sample of hair to confirm any one he suspects, and then he'll happily indulge himself with killing that person with his own hands. He'd already long forgotten the ideals he had when he was a doctor-- throwing it all away --for the sake of vengeance. Nothing else would fuel his heart more than to see that person in pain, slowly tasting the suffering Ai went through, before eventually letting them meet the inevitable end he will provide for them.

And he wasn't alone in thinking that way...

" Aqua."

Speak of the devil...

The older blonde pauses in his footsteps, raising his head to meet the eyes of his much taller younger brother. He was holding a convenience store plastic bag on his left hand.

" Beryl," He greets. " Buying ice cream again, I see?"

" Well, yes." Beryl takes a pause before he continues, " It was supposed to be in celebration of Ruby's accepted application....but she got rejected." He explained.

" Oh. That's a pity." Aqua feigns. " How did she take it?" He asked.

" The best she could." Beryl leaves it at that, " You know how she is."

So she cried... Aqua understood. He didn't mind that outcome at all, how she reacted only depended on if she planned to continue or not. It's looking like he won't have to do any more interferences now. That's good.

" Well, I should go talk to her." Aqua slowly brushed past him. " We should both be there to comfort her--"

" Stop interfering in her life."

" Pardon?"

Aqua turned around to see Beryl staring right at him with a calm disposition.

" Only the blind wouldn't be able to see Ruby's potential," Beryl speaks up, " Most idol managements would've gladly taken her under their wing."

" What are you trying to say here?" Aqua asked.

" I'm saying you're still trying to be an obstacle against her dream." Beryl states.

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Aqua sighs. " You can't be serious..." He looks at him with disappointment. " Beryl, don't tell me that what I'm doing is wrong. I'm trying to make sure she doesn't end up like Ai."

Beryl was silent.

" Besides," Aqua wants to remind him. " You and I have a greater mission at play here. We went over this, we agreed to find that damned murderer. And doing so, while keeping Ruby safe. So why are you--"

" I agreed on keeping her safe," Beryl doesn't deny. " But I didn't agree on stopping her dream."

Aqua sighs. " Right," he clicks his tongue. " That's the only thing we could never agree on..." he says, a bit bitter in tone.

" So is it right for me to assume that you may have done something that went against my efforts just now?" Aqua asked.

" No. I just sped up the process," Beryl answers. " She was going to recover anyway." And he wasn't lying. He didn't need to do anything, except give her back some bit of confidence early on. Or rather..... to pay back his endless debt to her. She was there for him, and he will be there for her in return.

"...."

" Aqua, maybe you should just--"

" Don't." Aqua's tone was serious. " I'm not changing my mind on this."

" Aqua, surely you already know that there are other means to keep Ruby safe while allowing her to become an idol." Beryl said.

Aqua goes silent at that, confirming Beryl's thoughts.

" Well, if that's what you really want to do. Then I'll leave it be." Beryl walks past him. " Let's go home-- or else the ice cream will

melt and I'd get an earful from our sister--"

" Wait."

The taller boy felt the hand of his older brother, grabbing him by the arm, and so he stops to glance at him.

" Will you get in my way?" Aqua questioned.

It doesn't take a second for Beryl to answer.

" If I have to, then I will."

" You're putting her at risk." Aqua grits, " If we allow her to become an idol flooded by her ideals. It's only a matter of time before she'd eventually end up like Ai--"

" She won't." Beryl says with certainty.

" And how are you going to be sure of that." Aqua asked.

" Well, firstly, she has us." He points to Aqua and himself. " As her brothers, we won't let that happen."

" And lastly.... it's because we're her brothers. That we won't let the same thing happen twice."

Aqua's eyes widened in surprise, he slowly lets go of Beryl's arm and stares at him silently, deep in thought. He sensed utmost sincerity in his words, it came from the heart, and he couldn't utter a response to it. The two of them may be standing on opposite sides on how Ruby's life should be dictated, but one thing remained constant; That they'd keep her safe.

And for Beryl...

He already lost his mother.

He won't lose his sister too.

~~~ End ~~~

**First official chapter is done!**

**Bringing back that good ol' classic Ruby and Beryl banter. And also having him and Aqua standing on opposite sides of the problem, with the only constant in the equation being that they both care for Ruby.**

**It's a battle that won't last for long once other elements are introduced here...**

**Things will start to shift. It'll start out subtle ( maybe ) before it just escalates to 100 ( maybe ) so be prepared!**

**See you in the next chapter~**

## 2. Cafe Strawberry!

*" You don't build a business. You build people and then people build the business."*

*- Zig Ziglar*

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" You were scouted?!" Both Aqua and Miyako exclaimed with shock written all over their faces. Beryl kept hidden the smile he had behind his cup as he drank his morning tea away.

" Yeah, for one of those underground idol groups." Ruby grinned brightly, " I feel this has to be fate! To be honest, I've been keeping my eyes on underground idol recruitment for a while now. And it's about time they saw the talent in me!" She gushed all cheerily.

Miyako and Aqua sent pointed glances at each other as Ruby continued to preach about fate finally looking kindly on her. The both of them can't help but feel suspicious and worried for Ruby's lack thereof, but when they turned back to look at the girl--

" Mom also became an idol after being scouted right?" Ruby sways her body left and right, her eyes closed in bliss. " Hehe~ This means I'm being guided by her elegance, don't you guys think?"

" Is it really a legit idol group?" Miyako asked.

" Not some sketchy job?" Aqua adds to the questioning.

Both of their tones were incredibly doubtful about all this. Beryl said nothing, silently sipping his tea as he waits for this wonderful situation to conclude. It's not something he orchestrated behind the scenes, it was a natural and inevitable occurrence that was bound to happen to girls like Ruby who clearly possess potential in the field. It was a variable in the equation that Aqua chose to ignore in the pursuit of shutting down Ruby's attempt of joining a high-profile idol group, since at the time, that was her more likely acceptance had he not been there to intervene from the background.

" It's nothing like that." Ruby says as she places a knuckle against her hip before glancing at the audition card she'd been given by the recruiter with glee.

" Have you gone over the terms of contracts?" Miyako asked the second question.

Ruby nodded vigorously before answering, " The scout said I can come see their next concert. Then we'll get into the contract and stuff after that!" She was very much *over the moon*.

" Hmm...." Aqua and Miyako expressed the opposite.

"Aw, I can't wait." Ruby says, her eyes ready to burst in stars.

" Good for you." Beryl finally comments. He places his now-empty cup down and proceeds to stand up. " I hope this time it goes well for you."

Ruby stares at him silently.

"....?"

Beryl reciprocates her stare, but with confusion as to why she was staring at him in the first place. It's like she's expecting something--

" Come on," She points at him with narrowed eyes and a monotone voice. " Out with it." She orders.

" Out with what?" He asked.

" Don't play dumb with me!" Her tone switches to accusing, " I know you have something else to say to me-- you *always* have something else to say to me!" She was clearly paranoid.

" I literally don't know what you're talking about..." He's just growing more confused.

Or is he?

" Grr, stop messing with me and out with your nasty remarks, Beryl!" She cried, stomping her feet on the ground. " You always spit backhanded compliments whenever I do something right!"

" No, I'm seriously wishing you luck." Beryl denies her assumptions. " You're painting me out to be a pretty bad person here, Ruby."

" Stop the gaslighting! I know your games, you heartless little brother!" Her ruby eyes turned bloodshot as she grabbed him by the collar and looking deeply into his golden browns.

Miyako watches this with amusement, while Aqua was lost in his own thoughts.

" You're overthinking it..." Beryl tries to say, but Ruby shushes

him immediately with a finger closing his mouth.

" After all these years of living with you, I've come to realize that your backhanded compliments are not merely for jest alone. No, far from it. It goes deeper than that. Rooted into the very depths of your pitch black heart is an evil that only targets me. Your nasty remarks are an instinct that take effect as soon as something good happens to me!" Ruby said with absolute certainty, her eyes betrayed no lies. This was her genuine belief.

And it was to Beryl's genuine surprise that she actually believes her own words.

Maybe he's gone a little bit too far with his jokes of her...

Seeking to reassure her, he tries to place his hands on her shoulders as a means to show his genuineness.

" Ruby..."

" What?" She narrowed her eyes, it seems she wasn't letting him off the hook just yet.

" I'm seriously wishing you luck here. I've got no insults, no snarky comments, no sass, no demeaning words-- No extra remarks whatsoever to say to you at the moment." He calmly tells her, patting her shoulders softly. " Have faith in my words sometimes, will you?"

"...." Her eyes soften, Beryl could feel her tension slowly fading but she was still skeptical of him.

" I mean it, Ruby."

His tone made her breath falter, and they stare at each other for a few more seconds before Ruby eventually lets out a sigh and releases her hold on his collar.

" Alright then...." She sighs again. " You better not be lying..." She said.

" Of course not." He says, and seeing that Ruby finally believes him. He turns to Miyako.

" I'll be going to work now, Miyako-san." He says.

" Ah," Miyako blinks, realizing that the soap opera just ended before it even registered in her head. She coughs, sitting up straight. " Very well, but is the establishment treating you well? It's been a few days since you started working."

" The boss hasn't caused any trouble for me. So I think I'm doing fine, and the work may be hectic but not at all stressful." He sprinkles some small lies and truths there. *The lie being that his boss wasn't giving him any trouble at all.*

" Off you go then. Don't slack off now, the boss may be a friend of mine but I made sure to treat you as she does any other employee." Miyako informs.

" You said that before, I got it." He nods. " I'll get going now."

" Good luck," Miyako smiles and Beryl gives one last nod to her before shooting a look to Aqua. The latter responds with a look of his own, and it was a mental conversation between them.

-We'll talk later-

That was all.

Putting on his shoes, he was just about ready to depart from home until he pauses for a moment. In that half-a-second, he decisively spun around to look at Ruby, who looked at him with a confused expression wondering why he wasn't leaving yet. But when Beryl opened his mouth, Ruby quickly realized the horror that was bound to drive through her.

No.... She thought, frozen.

Beryl's eyes twinkled in a way Ruby was absolutely familiar with. It was all the confirmation she needed.

" BERYL I SWEAR TO--"

" Hopefully the sasquatch doesn't lose twice."

" Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh----" Ruby let out a static

scream.

Beryl leaves immediately, satisfied upon messing with his sister just like always. Miyako is left to clean the mess as usual, sighing as she 'reboots' Ruby back to normal, while Aqua decided to head out a short while after to the director's place as usual.

All was normal as it could be in this makeshift family.

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"What in the world..."

Beryl was standing outside of the cafe. Staring with wide eyes at the many changes that happened to the cafe overnight, from the newly renovated exterior appearance in pink and white, to the more furnished and trendy interior he could see through the fresh windows.

"Hey!" Beryl's eyes locked onto a dreaded figure waving at him with a smile on her womanly face.

He walks over to her, and immediately points to the biggest change he noticed about the cafe--the sign.

"What is this." He curtly asked.

"Noticed the changes, aye? Pretty good, ain't it?" She said, releasing a proud huff. "Thought that our cafe needed a new renovation after a good 5 years of zero changes. You know, I didn't think pink would suit the cafe but after seeing it being applied right in front of me, I thought, 'Wow! How come I didn't think of this earlier--"

"I don't care about your newly painted walls or trendy furniture, Tamako-san." Beryl spoke without emotion. His boss, Tamako, pouted at the boy's disinterest in her efforts to give the cafe some 'pop'.

She was a 36 year old woman who had dreams of managing a pastry shop ever since she was young. But that didn't go so well, so she adjusted herself to a cafe business instead-- which went well for a good few years till customers stopped coming and more trendy



stores opened up around the block. Her business was doomed to fail, had it not been for the shining light standing in front of her.

*But still, show some respect kid!* She kept that thought in the back of her head.

Clearing her throat, she decides to ask him. " Then why exactly are you wearing such a sour look, if I may ask?" She questions.

" The sign. What is with the sign." He pointed again.

" Oh?" She grins, looking to where he was pointing. " The sign? Well..."

' C A F E S T R A W B E R Y L ' it read.

" Well, from what I can see....it's a sign!" She states dumbly.

Not having it today, he was just about to continue firing his questions but was cut off when he felt himself being pulled towards the cafe.

" Anyway, enough small talk and check out the place while you can! The cafe will get busy in an hour." She said.

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" You look like the life's been robbed from you." A female co-

worker, commented. She was a university student, at the age of 19 and going by the name of Tako Hina.

Beryl didn't say a word, just releasing a sigh after checking inventory like Tamako told him to.

" Is it the sign?" Another male co-worker came into the scene, asking Tako for confirmation. He was a colleague of hers from the university they both attend, it was a coincidence they ended up taking up work in the same cafe. His name is Hayate Genji.

" Most definitely the sign." Tako answered, amused at seeing their young co-worker's horrified demeanor. A swift contrast to the calmness and charm he always exuded since he got this job.

" Pfft," Hayate snickered.

Beryl turns to his co-workers with an unimpressed expression. " Would you two cut it out?"

" Ooo, looks like our little junior is angwy!" Hayate cooes, unaffected by the murderous aura Beryl exuded at the moment. Tako giggles before slapping Hayate's arm and having him tone it down a bit.

" Sorry, sorry. We're just milking this rare occurrence of you having a gap moe." Tako says.

" What is a gap moe?" Beryl asked.

" Never mind that, " She waves her hand, shoving the question away. " You must be curious why the boss renamed our place using part of your name, right?"

Beryl nods immediately.

" Well, that's because--"

" Uh, you guys might...want to uh...pause that conversation for later..." Hayate awkwardly smiles as he points to the approaching group coming towards the entrance. " They're coming."

" Oh god." Tako's face turns serious as she adjusts her apron and cap. " It's time to work then. Sorry, Beryl. But it's go time."

*Everything just gets worse and worse...* Beryl glooms. But gets ready nonetheless and puts on his battle face. With his notepad and pen in hand, he was ready for work.

Tako-san operated as the register, whichever male that comes into her lane is immediately swayed by her beauty, and with her skill of conversation she can easily set him up to spend more than he could. This tactic was deployed according to Tamako's wish.

Hayate-san works as the cafe barista, he's a naturally athletic guy, and he's also naturally mentally lacking. He's constantly on the lower side of the gradings back when he was still in high school, it was so terrible that it's a miracle that he even passed and got into the same university as Tako-san, by coincidence of course. Beryl doubts the last part however, sensing that there's something else going on between them, but leaves their business be.

And now, for Beryl's job, he works as the waiter. He serves the drinks and the pastries to every customer's table, and if needed be, he takes care of extra orders from those at the back of the long line. That was the original plan until...

" So Beryl, what do you think I should get today?" A female student from another school asked him with keen interest in her eyes, her friends that stood behind her were sneaking pictures and gushing on their friend to go on.

Beryl mentally sighs.

It's a shame that from being assigned to be a waiter....he's mostly been reduced to the cafe mascot. Thinking about it now, that's probably why his boss felt the need to add his name on the cafe brand just to establish more marketing. She was a foxy woman, indeed.

" Well...I suggest..." As Beryl went on to answer the girl's question by putting his main suggestions. He was left with having more to answer than answered, as the rest of the female frequent comers tried to shoot their shot with him as well.

Most of them weren't too obvious compared to the girls from earlier, in fact, they were quite subtle with their choice of words

and eye contact. But it didn't hide their intentions. He could feel it, and at first he thought he was overthinking but overtime he became more certain of it. He keeps his guard up as usual and answers their queries too before forcing them to move along and make their order so the line doesn't get clogged up.

Possessing good looks attracted unnecessary attention to Beryl, and in more normal circumstances he would've already gone and left the business to pursue a more calm occupation. But he has a goal, a second promise to keep, and from what he calculated he'll soon find answers to a few of his question as he continues working his shift here at a busy place like this.

The staff door suddenly opened, Beryl immediately groaning at the familiar perfume brushing through his nostrils. The source of his work stress.

" Sorry I'm late! Fell asleep at my computer, hehe~!" The mid-30's cafe owner said, she was dressed in the same uniform with a manager tag on her right chest to signify her high position.

" Boss! Please send these orders out!" Hayate begged as the hot coffees were slowly becoming cold due to Beryl being too busy having to appeal to the customers in the line to fetch these trays to their spots.

" Gotcha, Hayate-kun!" Tamako immediately gets to work.

*Ah, right...nearly forgot about her. Wish I did, but oh well...* Beryl off-sidedly thinks.

Tamako also worked as part of the staff, as the cafe's ' beautiful ' waitress.

*And as troublesome of a boss she is...*

Beryl watched Tamako speed around from table to table and then to the counter, only to go back at it again. Serving everyone with a cheery upbeat tone and a wonderful smile that managed to lighten up the depressed girls who didn't get the chance to have a proper

conversation with Beryl today. She told jokes, she shared some quick wisdom to those that called for it, and she was welcoming.

*....Despite her erratic tendencies, she was more than capable to handle the business on her own even on a busy day like this.*

" She's inhuman..." Beryl, ironically, muttered.

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" This is a pain the butt. I've gotta find some way to stop her."

Miyako sighs, holding a cup of coffee in one hand.

The two of them were left alone that evening. Ruby was still hanging out with her friends and attending some ' vocal lessons ' to help with her singing, while Beryl was still on his job, his shift won't end until the next two hours. For the time being, this was a much needed time for Aqua to recollect his thoughts about the current situation and to speak about it with someone who understands his feelings the most right now; Miyako.

" After what happened to Ai, I sympathize with you not wanting to let your sweet sister go down that same path." She said. " But Beryl...doesn't seem to be on the same side of the spectrum, is he?"

"..." Aqua sighs at the mention of his ' little brother '. Beryl made his reasons clear as to why he wants to uphold his promise to Ruby and to an extension, their late mother. But it still baffles Aqua how Beryl of all people could make a promise like that.

The impression he had of him back when they were still babies was that Beryl was logical, always thinking, calculating-- it almost felt unnerving. But now it's like the roles switched a bit. Aqua has taken his previous personality and added it to his own, while Beryl's perspective on everything changed. And both of their decisions to deal with the loss conflict against each other like oil and water.

" He's confident that by staying by her side and supporting her, she won't end up like Ai." Aqua muttered. " I couldn't fight against that. In all honesty, even I felt assured by his words though I never

told him."

" But I just..."

An image of the cold corpse of Hoshino Ai flashes in his mind, like a forever haunting chain that tied down his limbs, being unable to move on.

He clenches his fist.

" I just can't...play around with that chance." He stubbornly says. " And I have a feeling Beryl knows this too. He has to. But I don't understand why he's so confident about it.....or maybe..." *Even desperate about it*, he refrains to add.

"...Mm..." Miyako hummed, making his feelings heard and understood.

" You know, I..." But she had something to say too. " I still find myself thinking that if I'd done this or that then maybe things would be different now..." Her tone was melancholic as she spoke. " It comes back to me once in a while....like a reminder. I try not to let it get to me, but some days it just does. I guess when things like what happened happen, then it never goes away."

" And you just try to live with it, and you try to make up for it." Contrary to Aqua's mind, only the image of a smiling Ruby flashes through the older woman's mind and heart.

" Maybe...in my perspective, that's probably what Beryl feels too." She still doesn't know the full details of what happened that dreadful night when she found Beryl's hands bloodied and bruised, clutching onto the corpse of Ai like his siblings.

But she made the assumption that he had caused the damage onto the murderer's figure. And from what it looked, it was already too late when he did so.

" You understand what I mean by that, right, Aqua? Your little brother could still be feeling that guilt, the same as you. I doubt it

ever really disappeared either. Perhaps this is his way of coping with the loss, by making his sister's dream come true."

For him to make up for not being the best son to Ai,

Is by being the best brother to Ruby.

Miyako could also sympathize with that, so she speaks her next thoughts solemnly.

" I've raised Ruby while thinking of her as my daughter. I'll protect her no matter what." She notices Aqua's gaze had shifted to her.

" But....as she is my daughter, that's all the more reason why I can't stop her from feeling the way she does." She sighs. " If going down that path is her happiness, then it's hard for me to stop her."

" Besides....she's coming to look more and more like Ai...." She smiles sadly at Aqua. " I hate to admit it, but I think she has the qualities to make it."

She places her coffee back on the desk.

" It was always going to turn out like this, eventually." She said.

"..." Aqua averted his eyes after listening to Miyako's insight regarding the situation, and to Beryl as well.

He has much more to think about now...

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" The storm has been cleared..." Hayate said, wiping the sweat away.

" The beasts have been satiated..." The tension in Tako's shoulders release.

" We did it.." Beryl manages a sigh of relief.

The trio look at each other, stars making its appearance in each set of eyes. Before they all raised their knuckles and bumped each other's fists, proudly!

" We did it!" The three of them yelled in the now-quiet cafe.

Tamako claps in the background, catching the three's attention. She looked at them with a proud smile on her face. " Good job you three! This was the busiest day yet."

" Heh! All in a day's work," Tako says, flipping her hair confidently. " No biggie."

" Sounds awfully confident of you to say when you messed up 10 consecutive orders during the heat of the line." Tamako says without breaking her grin, causing Tako to stiffen and shrink back to her place with an awkward smile.

" Hah!" Hayate laughs, " Getting too full of yourself, Tako Bell~"

" Oh my f\*\*\*ing god, I swear if you call me that again I'm going to strangle you--" Tako was about to burst into flames until Tamako pulled her ear, causing the university student to screech in pain.

*" Ahhhrrrggghhhh--!"*

" Language, young one." Tamako says in a gentle, unforgiving tone.

Hayate continues to laugh, until Tamako pulls his ear as well.

" *Argh--! what the-- OW OW!*" He yelled, closing his eyes tight as he tried to save his ear, all to be in vain with Tamako's iron grip.

" Hayate-kun, you shouldn't be laughing, y'know~? Besides Tako-chan messing up the orders, you also wasted several rich coffee beans on drinks that nobody ordered." Tamako chortled at Hayate's panicked expression.

" W-What! That's only because Tako Bell over there messed up the orders! How was I supposed to-- GAH OW! STOP!" His reasoning fell on deaf ears as Tamako mercilessly tugged his ear harder like a mother disciplining both of her children.

" Y-You bastard--! throwing me under the-- OUCH, STOP! IM SORRY! I'LL STOP TALKING-- AAHHHHHHH" Tako yells in pain.



Beryl slowly backs away from the scene, NOT wanting to be a part of *that*.

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As punishment for the two university students, they were ordered to clean all the tables. Not wanting to anger their boss any further, they vigorously went to work though their expressions were depressing to see. It's like watching two kids trying to reconcile to their parent after breaking an expensive vase that the parent treasured.

" Better not hear any grumbling from you two!" Tamako barked.

" Y-yes, *Ma'am...*" they both responded.

*Tamako-san is ruthless sometimes...* Beryl is making sure to learn from his work senior's mistakes as they go along.

" Ah, and Beryl." Tamako turns around, causing a gulp to go down Beryl's throat upon meeting eyes with the woman.

" Good job, sweetie." She pats his cheek with a smile. " You did great as the cafe mascot-- reeling in all those fishes from the sea. The perfect bait!"

Beryl felt relieved a bit, but not proud at what he's been reduced to.

" You named the restaurant after me so you could bait them at max efficiency..." He mumbled.

" Why of course I did! " She tilts her head curiously. " There's

nothing wrong with that, is there?"

" Are you seriously asking me that?" Beryl wondered if the woman had any shame using a teen minor for exploitation.

" Listen, kid. It's just business!" She shrugs, " You think all great businesses in the past years are built by one person? No. Na-dah. Absolutely false!" She says as she raised her index.

" You need to build people in order to have them build your business!" She shares her wisdom. " I may be the boss of this place, but I'm nothing without my young employees." She admits confidently.

"...Still," Beryl held a look of uncertainty. " Do I really have to be the main ' attraction '? Why not have Hayate and I switch places. I can be the barista, and besides, he's pretty good looking and he's fit to go with it. I'm sure girls would fawn over him."

" Nah, he's not as pretty as you are." Tamako immediately rebukes.

" Well that hurt..." Hayate, who heard in the background, bitterly muttered. It was soon followed by a quiet giggle that escaped Tako's lips.

Beryl just sighs in defeat, until the cafe bell rings and a person walks in.

" Um, excuse me, is this cafe closed?" An unfamiliar voice called out to them.

" No, you came right in time! " Tamako immediately answered. " Tako-chan, man the register will you~?"

" On it!" Tako puts away her table rag and rushes behind the counter.

" Hayate-kun, be prepared for the order!"

" Right!" Hayate does the same and sprints behind the counter as well, ready to hear out the customer's order.

" Ah, thank you. Well, I'll be having..." As the customer said her

order, Beryl's eyes were trained on her like a hawk.

Her appearance immediately caught his curiosity. She was dressed in a way that didn't expose her identity, hiding away almost all of her skin underneath her clothing fabric, her face accessorized by black shades and facemask, and even her hair was hidden underneath the cap. But from her voice and figure, he could at least determine that it was a lady.

He finds it suspicious that she's dressed like this. People who dress like this tend to be hiding from something or someone, to be unnoticed by those around them or at the very least, unidentifiable. Even as the woman went away to take her seat by the window, his eyes glanced at her from time to time as Hayate's whistle filled in on the quiet atmosphere.

.....

There was a reason that Beryl worked in a place like this. And that reason was to find any clues that could help his investigation into the identity of their ' father '. In packed places like cafes, plenty of people talk. Their conversations ranging from normal topics to controversial ones, because that's the magic a cafe's atmosphere can provide. It puts people at ease to converse with anyone they are with, without having to worry about anything else while enjoying a good cup of coffee and a tasty dessert or pastry to go along with it.

While Beryl has not learned much yet, that's only due to the limited variety of customers the cafe is getting at the moment. Soon, once the hype about him dies down within a few weeks ( an estimate ), the cafe will expand on its variety of customers. All kinds of talks will happen, no doubt. And Beryl's hearing is trained enough that he could fix his hearing to any conversation that can serve his interest at will. And right now, the only interesting that's happened all week is the presence of the new customer.

" Beryl, can you serve this to her?" Hayate called out.

" Sure--" As Beryl was about to take hold of the tray, Tamako suddenly got to it first. Holding it in her hands.

" Beryl, I'll handle this one. Why don't you take a break?" Tamako

said sweetly. " You three did such a great job today, so take a short break before we'll do one last clean up before closing after this customer leaves, okay?"

Beryl noticed something was off in the boss's eyes. Before he could examine them further, she'd already turned around and headed to where the strange woman was seated, Placing down her tray and seemingly sharing a short conversation that aroused laughter from both women.

A minute later, Tamako took the vacant seat in front of her and they continued talking about something. Beryl tried plenty of times to try and sneak in but whenever he took a step, the strange woman suddenly turns her head to his direction, saying that she definitely notices him. And he immediately stills again.

*She has good senses....* Beryl had no doubt that it wasn't just coincidence.

" Hey, does the boss know that lady? They seem familiar with each other..." Beryl decided to ask his co-workers.

" Dunno," Tako shrugs. " First time I've seen her."

" Same here. But you're right, they do seem to look friendly with each other..." Hayate nods.

Beryl hums, seems like asking them didn't really help. Well, maybe he's just overthinking it. For all he knows, she could be a popular celebrity.....or a dangerous stalker. But none of that can be legitimately confirmed. He can't just cross it off as someone Tamako is good friends with since it might just end up as a misunderstanding-- it's not uncommon to find Tamako chatting with customers as if they've been longtime friends despite only meeting today. So that effect must be what's at play here.

Still, the awareness of that woman irks him. Beryl is experienced in masking his presence in his past life and he's confident that that hasn't changed even now, but she still somehow detected him. It definitely calls for his attention...

But for now, he should stay back and watch things unfold. Even if he wants to, he can't get close. And who knows? She might not even visit again.

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

Here is the second chapter, hope you enjoyed it!

For those who are curious, Yuki hasn't leaked the white room yet at this time. The small sample I released at the Goldenberyl oneshot series in my other book will come full circle in a little bit, don't worry!

The plot is slow right now, but it's going to pay off (hopefully) I want to take my time slowly integrating Beryl's (Kiyo) character in this world without obstructing too much of Ruby and Aqua's canon limelight (with the exception being his own upcoming storyline arc) so do bear with me here.

Look forward to the upcoming awesome scenes I had in mind, but keep those expectations low, okay?

See you in the next chapter~!

3. An old friend?

" The best protection any woman can have.... is courage. "

- Elizabeth Stanton

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" I'm home." Beryl says as he takes off his shoes before setting them to the side.

" You're back." Miyako greeted him from across, she seemed focus on her work. " How was today's work for you?"

" It's alright." *It was not. He still can't really wrap the fact around his head that he'd been reduced to a mere ' mascot ' for the place.*

Beryl looked around the living room and spotted Ruby eyeing him from the couch. Upon his gaze meeting her eyes, she immediately averts them with a small huff and focuses back on her phone. Beryl raises a brow at this behaviour, so he curiously goes over to her only to find that she's scooting even farther away as if his mere presence repulsed her very existence.

" Ruby?" He called out to her.

He was met with incoherent angry grumbling noises as she continued to ignore him. For a few seconds, he was left to wonder the happenings to have caused her mood, but then quickly remembers the reason why. He reaches out and pulls her ponytail.

" Agh--!" She jolts back, her hands immediately locking on his wrists, he didn't pull her hair too roughly but just enough to ignite the shock. " Wha--! What are you doing?!" She yells at him.

" Don't tell me you're giving me the silent treatment after what I said earlier," He said, amusement lurking in his tone. That just pissed Ruby off even more.

She hisses at him, trying to bite at him, but she couldn't even turn her head due to his grip on her hair. Beryl knew that was the instinctual move she was going to resort to, she's done that plenty of times. The first time honestly suprised him back when they were kids and got into their first serious scuffle where it ended up with her biting his arm like a rabid dog.

But he's grown alongside her for quite a while now, and he's gained the knowledge to counter all of his sister's attacks effortlessly. All her attempts to gnaw at his skin are futile, so unless she comes up with something smart ( which he highly doubts ) she will never be able to bare her fangs against him anymore.

" Let go of my hair!" She seethes. Glaring at him from as far as her peripherals could reach. " And of course I'm giving you the silent treatment, you were mean to me!"

" As I am, like, everyday. I thought you knew." He shrugs.

" That doesn't make it any better!" She rebuffed him, loudly, nearly causing MIyako to flinch from the ear-piercing sound.

" You're a sadist, aren't you? You have no qualms about bullying and pulling your own sister's hair as if that's an easy fix for why I'm mad at you!" She adds, " You're a red flag, Beryl! No girls will like you if you continue to treat your sister this way!"

" Well, your reactions are amusing. So of course I'd bully you." Beryl didn't hide the truth.

*" I'm going to rip your face off--!"*

" Well, that won't be happening any time soon with the position you're in." Beryl mocked.

*" MIyako-san, help meeee!!!"*

Ruby cried out to their surrogate mother in hopes for the older woman's interference. Miyako sighs before setting her eyes on Beryl.

" Let go of your sister, Beryl." She said with a slight commanding tone, which caught Beryl's attention.

It was not often that Miyako intervened in the two's consistent squabbles, they would usually fix themselves once they cool down. But Miyako can see that Ruby wasn't letting it go this time, and if the older woman were to just leave it be then things might unnecessarily escalate to a bad situation. Beryl realizes this too, and slowly lets go of Ruby's hair.

" Finally!" Ruby immediately scoots away, leaning even further to the end of the couch, hissing at Beryl like an angry cat. " I hate you, Beryl!"

"...." Beryl stared at her with an unsurprised expression. He knew that she didn't mean that and that this was just due to his teasing. He sighs, stuffing his hand in his pocket and then taking a seat next to her.

" Well, that's a shame." He releases an even more deeper sigh, " Oh, an incredible shame indeed."

Ruby narrowed her eyes at him, wondering at what he's trying to pull. She's known him long enough to be sure that he always has something up his sleeves, especially when he's out to get what he wants. Always calculating in that head of his, Ruby won't fall into his bait!

Beryl takes something out of his pocket, which made Ruby's eyes widen in surprise upon seeing what he was holding. His golden brown eyes looked at her, exuding that smugness she utterly despised whenever he knew he got the upper hand on her.

" You see, I love my sister quite a lot." Beryl starts, mimicking a dramatic tone. " And as much as I like to bully her, I also like to pamper her just as much. Which was exactly what I planned to do as soon as I'd gotten home but...."

Ruby was twitching, her mouth salivating at the delicious convenience store pudding he's got in his hand. Normally, she wouldn't react, but from the packaging alone she could tell that this wasn't just any old convenience store pudding she's eaten hundreds of times. But it was a brand new strawberry-cream pudding imported from Europe, and by the gods does it look delicious from the packaging alone....

" Contrary to my expectations, it seems I've come home to an



older sister that seems to hate me." Beryl was playing with her, and Ruby hated it. " How could I ever give this delicious pudding to a sister of whom I very much care deeply about, only to find out that she does not harbor the same feelings for me--"

" J-Just say sorry, damn it!" Ruby's face turned red, feeling embarrassed that his plan was working. " J-Just say sorry and I'll forgive you!"

" .... " He stares at her for a moment. " Really? Will that be all?"

" Y...Yes, and you also give me that pudding..." Ruby said in a tone indicating of how ashamed she was acting, even if she does receive an apology from him, he wasn't going to mean it and by then it'll all just wound up in her defeat.

*I just wanted a genuine apology from you...* Ruby sadly added in her thoughts. He didn't have to get on his knees, even though she would've 100% totally asked him to do that just for good measure, but if his apology sounded genuine enough then she would've--

" Ruby, the tryouts for that underground idol business happens next weekend, right? " He interrupted her thoughts.

" Yeah." She says, confused and concerned as to why he isn't fake apologizing to her yet. What's with the delay?

"..." He was silent for a moment, averting his eyes from her and deciding to settle his gaze on the pudding he was holding. While sighing, he slowly begins to unpackage it.

Ruby watched in alarm, *was he just going to eat it in front of her?!* *Oh this son of a-- wait, that would mean calling her own mother the b-word if she finishes that sentence-- fine! Then this guy's just a bloody cu--*

" I wish you luck again." He repeated what he said this morning, catching Ruby off-guard but then her face deepens into a pout as she thinks that this was just another ploy to butter her up and hit her with the nastiest backhanded compliment known to mankind.

But when he handed her the freshly-opened pudding with the plastic spoon on top, she blinks in surprise before momentarily accepting it. Albeit, still confused.

" Ruby, I really do mean it. And I did mean it back when I said in the morning too. I want you to achieve your dream." He spoke sincerely to her, placing his hands flat on his lap.

" Really?" She already knew, but she couldn't help but ask.

Beryl smiles. " Just know, that for every bad thing I do to you-- I'll make it up to you triple."

" And your way of making it up to me is one pudding?" She questioned.

" I've got two more." He presents two more pudding cups and places it on the table, Ruby glows at that before giggling.

" How about *not* doing bad things to me at all?" She suggested, which got a chuckle from Beryl in response.

" Hey, I'm serious!" Ruby pouts. " What if you accidentally destroy my self-esteem, huh? What then? I bet you'd feel *sooo* guilty if that were to happen, you'd be begging on your knees and crying for my forgiveness, ' Oh, Ruby. I'm so sorry! I really didn't mean to! Allow me to make it up to you by slicing my belly open and offering you my innards as an act of penance!' " She said, trying to mimic Beryl's monotone voice while adding little tweaks of her own.

" That won't happen." Beryl says, shaking his head with certainty before locking eyes with her and showing some determination of his own.

" As much of a prick I can be to you-- one thing remains non-changing," He leans his cheek onto his palm. " I'll always be your supporter, Ruby."

*Through thick and thin.*

" Hehe~ I know." That brought a smile to Ruby's lips before she got another spoonful of pudding in her mouth. " I'm counting on you, my dear future secretary little brother!" She declared, pointing her plastic spoon at him.

" Of course, future idol older sister." He responds in kind. A

calmness exuding in his eyes.

Miyako couldn't help but smile at her screen as she typed away, hearing their conversation, it was heartfelt and it tugged at her own emotions. Even when the two of them bicker constantly like a buzzing bee hive or akin to a volcanic eruption, they are still siblings. The closest ones in the world, one can even argue.

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It was 9 pm, and Aqua was alone as he sat on the swing with a deep thinking expression worn on his face. The moonlight dresses over him, and the stars fill up the dark night sky for his eyes to get distracted by. Clasp his hands, he waits for a certain person to arrive and meet him here. The spot was nostalgic, what once felt like a normal kids' playground that Ai took them to, and now it's a meeting spot for him and the other guy to discuss things privately.

" Aqua."

Hearing that familiar voice, Aqua's eyes turn to the one person he'd been waiting for, a flashback to that one snowy day momentarily showed up in his mind as he visualized the two of them back in their younger selves meeting up like this, growing up to now teenagers ready to set into the level of high school. Beryl silently takes the vacant seat next to Aqua's and plops down, the night breeze swaying his long golden purple-tinted locks.

" You must be quite pleased with how things are turning out, huh, Beryl?" Aqua starts.

" Well, it was bound to happen." He responds. " So I guess you're right, I am pleased. It was only a matter of time till' underground agencies notice Ruby's potential and decide to invite her."

" So troublesome....all of it." Aqua releases a sigh. " Even if I try to stop this attempt, she'll just come back again. With or without your interference, I realize that now."

" Then I'm sure you also realize there is only one other way to satisfy everyone in this situation." Beryl eyes him,

Aqua recalls to their conversation from the other night, when Beryl called out Aqua's hidden thoughts; A way to let Ruby live out her dream while keeping her safe. Aqua had already thought it out ages ago and Beryl somehow picked up on that fact, but the older brother refused that idea. Letting Ruby become an idol was detrimental to his wishes in keeping her safe....

He still relives that night, forever haunting him. And sometimes that image fluctuates from Ai bleeding out against the door.....to Ruby. It's a fear he has yet to properly realize yet, with his mind mostly set on the path of revenge. But keeping Ruby safe from a scenario such as that still takes priority.

" There's got to be other options..." Aqua muttered.

" You'll only exhaust yourself by the end of it." Beryl answers for him. " Besides, if she does get accepted into a shady underground business like that. Then it's just going to add more stress to you, right? Who knows what they'll do with her, and who knows how people would handle her. Untrustworthy management can leave major repercussions if things go south, and I'm sure both you and I are aware of the dire situations that can provide..."

Aqua grows silent at that.

" So, knowing that," Beryl stands up, looking down on him. " What's your next move on the board?"

Aqua couldn't refute any of what Beryl said. He's voiced out the same thoughts he'd been thinking in his head whenever the topic of Ruby becoming an idol popped up. Being part of the entertainment industry-- as an idol --is already difficult as it is, but if Ruby starts from a business with bad management and low income, then that'd be even worse. And even if by the off chance that the management was as good as the last idol business he chose to sabotage for her, then it's still risky considering she'd be much out of reach. So...

Aqua had no next move to even the field.

It's already checkmate, brother. Beryl thinks. By a stroke of luck and coincidence, Aqua was left with no other option to explore.

Only one. And that one would satisfy everyone in their situation, Ruby would be ecstatic but left potentially vulnerable. That's why it needs a safe guard to handle whatever comes her way.....

" Fine, but on one condition." Aqua states as he stood up and faced him. " You have to make me another promise, it's an extension to the first one we made."

Beryl nods, already having an idea as to what Aqua had to say.

And just like that snowy day, their conversation was only heard between the two of them as the sound of crickets drowned their voices out...

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Four days rolled by since then, and Ruby's tryouts were going to happen in the next two days. Since then, Ruby was prepping herself up again with fashion choice, cute poses, a good dance routine in case that's something they want to check on-- but most importantly, she worked on her vocals. As for Aqua, he decided to investigate the idol group Ruby was invited to by attracting one of their girls into the deal of joining the once popular Strawberry Productions, the same alma mater of the B-Komachi girls, and the birth place of the once glowing star-- Ai.

He effortlessly smooth talked the girl into expressing her truths about the happenings within her group; The favoritism of a certain girl, the shady management, and the boiling frustration that'd been generating within their group for quite a while now. And just as he presumed, the pay was underwhelming, with most of it being deducted towards her clothes and stage quota and other miscellaneous things a more better off management should be able to handle. The situation was quite average to what he's expected.

As for Beryl....well...

*He just continues working.*

" Hey, Beryl. What high school are you planning to take?" Hayate

curiously asked.

The cafe's usual busy waves of people have already subsided. Now, it was relatively quiet.

" Yoto high." Beryl answered.

Tako's eyes widened upon hearing that name as she immediately tries to remember what she knows about that school.

" Isn't that the school that offers those performing arts programs?" She asked after a few seconds.

" Yes." He answered.

" Oh~? You tryna become an actor in the future, Beryl? If you do then please grant me VIP seats to your first feature film!" Hayate quickly reserves himself in the list without even hearing any semblance of confirmation from the younger boy.

" Hey, don't forget about me too!" Tako fusses, " As your seniors in work and in life, we'll support you every step of the way." She puffs her chest with pride.

Beryl blankly stares at them. " I'm not going to become an actor."

"...."

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" Oh." They both uttered.

" Then..." Hayate looked confused as he tilted his head to him. " Why exactly are you attending that school?"

" My sister wants to make use of the program they offer. And maybe the same will go for my brother," He replied.

" Oh, right! I almost forgot-- did your sister join an agency yet? I heard you need to be affiliated with an agency to be eligible for their program." Tako asked.

" No, not yet. But soon." Beryl says, as the conversation he had with Aqua resonated in his mind for a passing moment. " But she's received a ton of offers so--"

" Why are you going along with her, though?" Hayate interrupted. " You don't seem motivated to become an entertainer, seeing as how you clearly dislike the attention you get from our customers."

" I don't." Beryl sighs, " I'm just there because of my siblings." *Though, both him and Aqua would agree that it's mostly because of Ruby.*

" But dude, don't you have any dreams of your own?" Hayate frowned. " Don't just follow your siblings around like that, especially if it's a place you don't hold much interest in."

" I don't really have dreams of my own. And it's not like I'm feeling bothered by it, I do have a back-up position found right here in this cafe." Beryl dryly says.

Hayate's look turns pitiful. " Oh god. That's just sad. Working for the rest of your life here is just slightly better than a dead-end job at an office company, but still kinda tra--"

" *Ahem.*"

Hayate's face turns pale, and goosebumps arise all over his skin as his breathing stops altogether. Beryl's eyes went wide, also noticing the danger lurking behind his senpai, and both boys failed to realize that Tako already ran away a good distance from the counter as she watched the situation from afar with her phone out ready to record.

" My cafe is kinda what, Hayate-kun?" Tamako asked, dangerously sweet bait.

" --Kinda great! Haha! I was *going* to say KINDA GREAT!" Hayate quickly answered, but that didn't stop Tamako's eyes narrowing at the sweat dripping down the side of his face as she saw the fear in his brown eyes.

" Hm~? Really? I could've sworn I heard the last word starting with a ' T '!" Tamako recalls.

" T-Then I meant TERRIFIC!" Hayate quickly reiterates, panicking on the inside as he turns to Beryl for some support, rapidly blinking in his eyes in morse code explaining to him his potential final will.

" R-Right, man? That's what I was going to say, right?!" He seeked out his junior's help.

Beryl took pity on him, and as he was about to open his mouth and say ' yes '. Tako immediately took the opportunity to shut it all down from a distance.

" *Tamako-san! He was going to say ' trash '! T-R-A-S-H. Trash!*" She threw her co-worker under the bus with a malicious smile.

" T-Tako, what the hell?!" Hayate screeched, and the girl merely chuckled at his sad position.

*How heartless....* Even Beryl was suprised.

" Ohh~ I see..." Tamako's eyes switch up into a menacing pair. " Well, why don't I fix that way of thinking!" She gripped Hayate's broad shoulders with her slender.

" N-No, wait--!"

But it was already too late to redeem himself, Beryl watched as his senpai was snatched by the Cafe's devil. Tamako the manager was merciless to workers who display such disloyalty in her business, she was fine handling customer critique, that was different. She was a woman who did what she want, and still following a certain disciplinary standard-- a standard she personally extends to her employees as well.

Beryl takes off his employee hat and pats it to his heart and uses his other hand to form a salute for his senior, wishing him well, to wherever the devil manager sends him.

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When Hayate returned from hell, he was a reformed man. Or, is it more rightful to say that he was a rebuilt robot. Seeing as how Tamako instructed specific orders and he proceeds to do them without question, and with such efficiency that Tako nor Beryl witnessed before.

" Hey...uh....are you alright?" Tako asked, now feeling a bit worried.

Hayate smiles, eerily. " Yes."

"...."

Beryl watched as Tako tries to provoke the man with her usual quips and bantering attempts, but he didn't react like he'd usually would. It made him wonder what exactly Tamako did to make him act this way, it felt eerily canon to how he acted back when he was still in the White Room.

" He'll return back to normal." Tamako assured him.

" What did you do to him...?" Beryl asked.

" Haha! Well, you see. Adults have a special way of doing things, you'll learn what those things are as you grow." Tamako chippers.

" Why don't you just tell me now?" He dared to ask, only to be silenced by the secretive glance she shot at him.

" Well...if I did....then how would I be able to deal with you if you already know..." She winks.

....Right, I won't ask. Beryl concludes immediately. Instead, he averts his eyes to a certain spot in the cafe, the seat by the window where *that* person would sit.

" Tamako-san, may I ask you something?"

" Sure!"

" That lady who's been visiting the cafe since the rebranding. Is she a friend of yours?"

" My, my! Don't tell me that you're going to hit on a woman much older than you, Beryl. She's 28, ya know?" Tamako teased.

" Could you please answer?" Beryl boredly said.

Tamako giggles to herself before nodding and confirming Beryl's thoughts. " She is an old friend of mine, and she's one hell of a coffee addict to boot! That's why she comes here."

"....I see." *Well that answered one question at least*, Beryl thinks. But there's still much for him to figure out about this woman, should he try his chances and pry further into the friendship his manager has with her?

" Why don't I get to serve her?"

" Hm?"

Beryl turns to Tamako with a curious look. " Whenever her order is ready to be served, you're insistent on handling that tray yourself. Even if you're swamped by other customers and in the rare chance that I'm free, you still make the effort to service that woman instead of letting me do it."

" Well, she is my friend." Tamako shrugs, " Of course I want to be the one to serve her since I also take the time to catch up with her. We don't often meet up so....I take my chances."

" Besides, I thought you disliked serving women. Seeing as how you attract 90% of them that comes into our humble little shop." She questioned him now. " So you must be into older girls if you're implying that you want to serve my friend-- or could it be that you also have some romantic interest in me--?!"

" Keep dreaming, you washed up cougar."

Beryl blandly says without any emotions whatsoever. Tamako deflates, feeling her old heart shattering to pieces as he stepped all over her ego.

" Uuuu, you're so mean! I'm only 35!" she cried out in defense.

Beryl paid no attention to that whatsoever as the person of their topic walks in the cafe, in that same get-up she wears, maximizing

on concealing her appearance. As Tako began to take her order like usual, Beryl eyes her quietly. One of these days, he'll find himself a good opportunity to approach her, he averts his eyes and decides to walk into the back to take a small break since Tamako will serve her anyway. For now.

Little did he know, that the mysterious lady felt his gaze all over, and shot him a quiet one as well as he made his way to the staff room. She was just as curious as to why the boy had been constantly sneaking glances at her for the past week, and soon an opportunity would likely arise where their paths can formally collide.

Only a matter of time....

Till' these two ' old friends ' can finally reunite, albeit unknowing of that fact.

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She takes a deep breath, and blinks away all her doubts as she shifts her expression into a smile.

*She's determined to win their hearts for sure!*

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" Ta-dah! "

She spins around and hits her sweet pose, winking as she did so.

" You look cute." Miyako compliments.

" You look decent." Beryl also comments.

Ignoring the second person's comment, Ruby only allows herself to register Miyako's words.

" Well, on a big day like this, you've gotta put on something fashionable, right?" She says, spinning around and twirling her dress. " Oh, I can't wait!"

Aqua and Beryl make eye contact, the former sending a nod to the latter. It was about time.

" So, Ruby, you're really serious about this?" Miyako asked.

Ruby's smile fades a bit, her face forming into a determined expression as she nodded with an affirming hum to show that she's certain. Miyako closes her eyes for a bit, thinking of what else to say, before looking at her daughter again.

" You know that you're about to enter a harsh place, right?" She tests her. " You might not sell well and you'll end up feeling miserable. And that could even extend to your personal life--"

" I know that." Ruby huffs. " I already know. And I'm without a doubt feeling ready to accept that. Besides, Aqua has already told me that much--"

" Falling victim to stalking is a familiar story these days." Miyako's next words immediately shook Ruby down to her core. Both Beryl and Aqua take note of how she was going to handle that. " Nasty comments might surge around the internet soon, and most could do nothing but accept it. All of that pressure. Even so, you're

still willing to--"

" This is a dream I can't let go of," She says, confidently. Suprising both Beryl and Aqua as she continues, " I want to pursue it, no matter what I face my way. I'll give it all I've got, offer up all my patience, and dig down deep if I have to!" She echoes *his* words.

Beryl's lips parted for a moment upon realizing that, before it formed into a small smile as a glimmer of proudness took place in his golden brown eyes.

" This is my chance...to finally become an idol." She places her hand to her heart. " I know...I'm meant for it!"

" I'm going to be like mom!" She says with conviction.

"..." Aqua stares at her, before glancing at Beryl again.

That promise....you'd better keep it. He thinks. He sighs, before looking at Ruby again.

" Do you really mean it?" He asked her this time.

" Absolutely." She especially hardened her tone to her older brother, the one person that needed to show faith in her.

It was an intense stare-down, with Ruby fighting for his approval and him looking at her with a coldness, to see if she could withstand the cold winter that might befall her in her chosen career. But she radiated the sun, always, her ruby coloured eyes beautifully reflecting the rays of the brightest star that is Hoshino Ai.

Having enough, Miyako decides that it's time to come out with it. She stands up.

" Well, don't join that group then." She said.

" Huh?" Ruby flinches, turning to her in shock. " W-What...?"

It was an unexpected hit at Ruby, but she held on strong. " B...But I....I said I wanted to--!"

" Join our agency instead." Miyako said as she crossed her arms. " If you really want to become an idol, that is."

" H...Huh?" Ruby didn't realize it, but through her mix of emotions from Miyako's words, her tears already pricked at the corner of her eyes.

And to her chagrin, Beryl snapped a quick photo to troll her later.

" Strawberry Productions will be putting together a new idol group for the first time in years."

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" Now, put a tally impression right here." She points to a spot on the document.

Ruby looks at her quizzically, " ' Tally impression' I don't know what that is but I just have to push this thing down here right...?" She said before stamping the red tally on the exclusive contract.

Miyako nods. " And with that, you're now an entertainer of Strawberry Productions."

Ruby squeals. " Ehehe~! Yes!" She wiggled her feet excitedly.

" If you pull anything, we'll sue you." Miyako adds.

" Whoa, scary." Ruby quipped.

" That's how serious this is..." Miyako clarifies with a relieved smile.

Miyako put away the documents in a secure brown folder while Ruby continued to fawn over her officially signed exclusive contract. Aqua was still conflicted about this decision, but in the end-- there really was no other way to dodge this.

" This is also required for entry in the performing arts department, so don't get mad, alright Aqua?" Miyako turns to the older son.

He turns away. " Never said I was against it."

Beryl nudges Aqua's arm. " Don't get sulky now, older brother." He smirked.

Aqua rolls his eyes at Beryl's mockery.

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(A month and a half later...)

It's an integrated middle and high school, and one of the few in Japan that has a performing arts department. And not just anyone can apply for the performing arts as it is necessary to produce a certificate showing you are affiliated with a talent agency...

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(Performing Arts Department interview room....)

" I'm Hoshino Ruby, with Strawberry Productions." Ruby introduced herself with her most cheery smile.

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(Meanwhile in the General Education Department interview room....)

" Quite the name you've got there..." One of the interviewers said in surprise, well, it is an unusual name to have.

" Eh? You have a standard score of 70?!" A female interviewer's eyes went saucers upon his checking his profile results. " Why'd you apply here when the standard score is 40?"

They couldn't help but ask, all of them were in disbelief that such a smart boy chose a school like this despite the fact that he could easily search for better high schools that could further his studies since this school mostly specializes in those who pursue in the performing arts...

Aqua, hums a bit, thinking of an answer.

Then it hits him.

" I was charmed by the spirit of this school." He said.

[Previously passed the entrance exam for Tokyo Medical University!]

" Our school appealed to you that much?!"

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(Also in the General Education Department room...)

" My name is Hoshino Goldenberyl." He bows his head politely. His hair was tied into a clean ponytail.

" That's....a-another one?" the interviewer nervously asked. " Hey, check his standard scores." He says to the woman.

"Right. It's--" Her eyes went wide again. " 70 too?!"

" Is there a problem?" Beryl asked, calmly.

" N-No! It's just....your uh...older brother, Aquamarine, was it? The both of you are so smart...." The man said, feeling intimidated by Beryl's aura.

" Ah, I see." Beryl nods. " Well, him and I just like to study, is all."

But actually....

(Flashback to the day before high school entrance exams...)

" Aqua, what do you think is the standard score for the high school?" Beryl asked.

" Probably 40." Aqua answered.

" 40..." Beryl repeated. " So are you planning to just hit that score and get it over with?" He asked.

" No, I plan to hit the max. " Aqua answers.

" I see..." Beryl initially thought about just hitting the average score but hearing out Aqua's decision influenced him a bit. What's the point in scoring average? That place could never track him down now, and it wouldn't be too weird if he aims for the same goal as Aqua, he could just pass it off as that they're siblings and are very much alike.

There's not much reason to hold back now, is there?

' I guess I'll aim for the max too....'

(Flashback ends...)

" B-But if you don't mind me asking....why'd you apply here? Are you just going along with your siblings...?" The man asked.

" Hm....well...." Beryl takes his time, before coming up with an answer.

" The school's spirit charmed me."

"...."

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" How'd it go?" Aqua asked Beryl as he walked over to them, fresh out of the interview room.

" Went swell." Beryl answers. " You two?"

" I think mine's went fine." Ruby looked positive.

" It went without a hitch." Aqua also answered before looking off to the window's scenery of the courtyard. " On the unlikely chance that I get rejected, it's probably because of my name."

" Pfft," Ruby snorts.

" Same here." Beryl can still vividly remember the confusion he felt when he was first reborn as Ai's son.

" Well your full name is Hoshino Aquamarine and Hoshino Goldenberyl, after all!" Ruby points out in amusement. Even though she strictly warned them to accept their names back when they were young.

*A girl with pinkish-red hair passes by them...*

" Though both of your names are a mouthful to say, so we just

call you ' Beryl ' and ' Aqua '. " Ruby laughs.

**" Aqua...?"**

The siblings paused upon the mention of Aqua's name. They both turned to the redhead that passed them, where she stood in the halls seemingly frozen in disbelief. Her back was faced towards them for the most part, until she slowly turned around and showcasing her innocent eyes.

**" Aqua...?"**

She repeats again.

" Hoshino Aqua?!" She points at him in shock.

Before Aqua could say anything, the girl stomps towards him, poking him on the chest.

" Aqua? Aqua? Are you really Hoshino Aqua?!" She interrogated him.

"....Who are you again?" Aqua asked.

Suddenly, both Ruby and Beryl's eyes lit up in recognition.

" Hey wait...that's....!" They both pointed at the girl as they continued in sync,

*" The genius child actor who can lick baking soda off the floor like that!"*

They both looked absolutely certain, but--

" You're both wrong! It's the genius child actor who can cry in ten seconds flat!!!" She screamed at the two younger siblings. " Gosh you two are still annoying as ever-- I'm Arima Kana, the girl that acted with Aqua in that movie!"

" Oh..."

"...."

Ruby and Beryl shared a glance at each other before turning back to Kana.

"...."

And with the most unbelievable audacity, Beryl spoke.

*" Never heard of her."*

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

Hope you enjoyed chapter 3!

Since my school year has officially ended (at long last) I finally have some time to actually binge Oshi no Ko anime and read its manga.

So the next chapter might take a while to come out. And it may or may not be the start of everything I wanted to write for this fic, so take my words with a grain of salt!

And I can't lie. Don't get hopeful from this but I've thought about a reaction to my Goldenberyl oneshot series, but with only specific people.

The main cast of cote characters would probably be cut out and minimized to the ones who would give an interesting reaction.

But the biggest thing I had in mind was that it would include Canon Aqua and Ruby (Beryl-less canon universe) and also Ayanokoji's canon mother, Mika! It's fun to imagine how these three specific characters would respond to Kiyotaka slowly adjusting himself to his life as Goldenberyl

And with the cold hearted Mika slowly realizing the motherhood she chose to miss out on.

Not writing that tho. Too long. So if anyone wants to pick up on this idea, then please do so :)

Also Beryl being lowkey the best little brother rn--

See you in the next chapter~

4. A name that is quite familiar...

" A good name is more to be desired than great wealth, and to be respected is better than silver and gold. "

- *Proverbs 22:1*

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" Never heard of her." Beryl says without emotion.

" H-Huh?!" *Fwip! Thonk!* It felt like an arrow shot straight through Kana's heart, she shakily points at him accusingly. " Y-You're still such a brat!"

Ruby giggles behind the cover of her palm.

Aqua sighs, shaking his head at Beryl's merciless teasing. But upon taking a closer look at the girl, the older triplet can finally recall her name, the genius child actor that is Arima Kana, whom he starred alongside with in that short film years ago. She still retained the same complexion from when she was a child, just lost the baby fat and all.

" Who would've thought we'd reunite here," Aqua decided to say. " I remember you now, Arima Kana, was it?"

Upon hearing her name be properly recognized, by Aquamarine no less! She quickly recovers, wiping away the cartoonish blood trickling from the corners of her mouth, and nodded happily.

" Yes, that's me." She seems a bit too happy that Aqua remembers her. " Wait, since you're here in this school-- then does that mean you're joining the performing arts department!" She looked up at him, excitedly.

" No...I applied for general education." Aqua answers.

"...."

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**" BUT WHY? "**

" My sister is trying for performing arts here, and I was worried about her. So I applied here too." Aqua explained.

" Same here." Beryl shrugs.

" What?!"

" Both of them have a sister complex." Ruby said, smiling.

" Gross!" Kana could only cry out, as she was met with a devastating barrage of tone changes.

*" You know, I never did like this girl..."* Ruby muttered to Beryl.

*" Neither did I..."* He replied, the same volume of mutter.

*" Cut it out you two, if both of you are going to be accepted. You'll end up being her juniors."* Aqua reminds.

Both Beryl and Ruby's faces turn to disappointment.

" You've gotta be kidding me.." " Aw, what..."

" Hey, I can hear you!" Kana breaks through their conversation, her face looking irritated, and her fist clenched ready to knock them on their heads for their blatant disrespect.

" Welp, no point in fighting it, I guess." Ruby sighs. " Let's get along, Loli-senpai." She says as she nonchalantly puts her hand out for a lazy handshake.

" Keep that up and I'll bully you!" Kana vehemently threatens.

" Hey, nobody is going to bully Ruby but me." Beryl makes his stance clear on the matter.

" What in the world are your priorities?!" Kana looked at him, flabbergasted.

" Hey, you don't get to bully me, neither!" Ruby immediately shoots Beryl a look.

" It's better than letting an underdeveloped senpai bully you though, right?" Beryl challenged.

" Well... I guess that's a point there..." Ruby conceded on that, nodding.

" '*Underdeveloped senpai*' ?! Are you referring to me!" Kana gawked, " Ouuuu, both of you haven't changed one bit!" She then points to Beryl. " I don't even remember your name!"

" I'm Goldenberyl." He answered.

" Don't just introduce yourself after you blatantly insulted me!" Kana said through gritted teeth, making a variety of angry faces at both Ruby and Beryl.

Beryl found this incredibly amusing.

*There he goes again...* Aqua thought, that look in Beryl's eyes signifies that he's finally found another dummy to torture. This is going to be a long day full of Kana's suffering, and in all honesty, Aqua had better things to do right now besides loitering here and



watching his little brother and little sister bully the living hell out of the proclaimed genius child actor.

" Well, I'll head out first. I'm going to stop by the director's place." Aqua says, already deciding to spin his heel and walk away.

" Oh, alright, see ya." Ruby waved goodbye.

Kana stops growling at Beryl upon realizing that Aqua was leaving.

" W-Wait, hold up!" Ignoring Beryl's continuous taunts, she swoops past both him and Ruby and chases after Aqua down the hallway and to the exit. " I've still got so much to ask you!!!"

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" Is it me, or does it seem like she's vying for brother's attention?" Ruby asked.

" Seems like it." Beryl agrees before turning to Ruby. " Think she likes him or something?"

Ruby's face immediately scrunches upon hearing that. "Not funny." She

Beryl chuckles. " Hey, people can change after a while, y'know?"

*I've changed, after all....* Beryl thinks.

" Still," Ruby pouts, crossing her arms. " As Aqua's little sister, it is my duty to ensure that if ever he gets into a relationship with a girl-- she'd have to go through a screening test. And I'm confident to say that loli-senpai is far from getting any approval from me!"

" I think that's what you call bias..." Beryl remarks.

Ruby suddenly narrows her eyes and turns to Beryl with a judging look. " The same goes for you, Beryl."

" Hm?"

" As your *older* sister, I have the right to judge whomever girl you choose to be with. If I don't like her, then she's out!" She proclaims, forming the X sign with her arms , wearing a determined look.

Beryl sighs, shaking his head at her. He wasn't really interested in the concept of romance, or at the very least, it was far from a priority. He recalls the many girls he's rejected in the past when they decided to confess to him, they would only become a liability to him and his promises, easily dismissed in favor of it. Rejection was far from the worst thing he could've given them, so there were no regrets there.

" Whatever you say," Beryl shrugs. " Anyway, since my business here is done. I still have to work to attend to at the cafe. I won't be able to walk home with you."

" That's okay." Ruby says, " I already planned to hang out with my friends today after the interview."

" Stay safe, alright?" The words come out of his mouth, like a habit he can no longer rid of.

Ruby smiles, she relishes the moments when he's soft with her at times, to the point where his mouth just says these type of things without giving him time to even think. It's endearing.

" I will." Ruby waves goodbye as Beryl turns around. " Good luck at work!"

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" Hey, listen to me!"

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" Hey, where're you going?"

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" Who is this director?"

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" Hey! Where're you living these days?"

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Why is she following me... Aqua mentally asks himself, closing his eyes in slight irritation as he continued to walk. For whatever reason, the girl was persistent in grabbing his attention, throwing questions left and right, the sound of her rushed footsteps trailing behind his own with the bounce of a goal in mind.

Even so, he continues to go on ignoring her--

" Are you even listening?! I'm talking to you!"

--He pauses, turning to her and spare her even a second of a glance--

She stares at him with a pout, a red hue dashed lightly across her face, making an annoyed expression.

" What middle school you from, huh?!"

" What's with that delinquent act?"

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"How long do you plan to follow me for?" Having enough, he decides to ask.

"Until you answer all of my questions." She smoothly puts.

Aqua averts his eyes away from her, thinking of a way to escape her without rubbing her off the wrong way.

"You still do acting, right?" She asks.

That question resonated in his heart, and without even thinking, he makes eye contact with her once again...

Her eyes looked hopeful, a pair of beautiful pinkish-red that matched the shade of her hair, holding a certain twinkle of hope in them. Her smile was quivering in visible excitement, along with the nervous grip she held on her backpack's strap.

Pity formed behind the gaze of his aquamarine eyes. It was a shame, he thinks. A shame that he would have to disappoint that hopeful gaze, even if he really shouldn't have to care much about it in the first place.

And so their stare down ends with Aqua closing his eyes, and averting his head.

"No, not anymore."

"Huh...?"

Such a simple answer bypassed her expectations. Her hopeful gaze quickly switched to one showcasing disbelief, she never would've thought he'd quit acting as a whole. She was thinking that maybe him picking general studies over the performing arts department was simply because he didn't feel the need to take up such classes, but to quit acting as a whole? It didn't make sense to

her.

" Oh...I see."

Something must've happened then, she thinks. It came as a shock, and as much as her curiosity wanted to be satiated right now, she felt this was not a good time to push it. They've just met after so long, it's been a decade since she last saw him. That very day he showcased a suprising knack for acting for that one unforgettable scene, the very first time that the spotlight had been stolen from her..... the very first time she felt so enraptured into his art.

" So, that being the case..." Aqua begins to walk away, thinking that their conversation was officially over.

" H-Huh?! No, wait!" But suprisingly enough, Kana didn't seem to want to let go of him yet.

She quickly caught up to him again, just walking behind his back.

" Come on, I want to catch up with you!" She requests.

" Hey!" Her tone remained determined, she attempts to walk beside him, peeking over his shoulder to get a glance of his face. " Wanna hang out with me at a karaoke bar or something?"

" Nope." Aqua immediately rejects.

" Really?" She pauses, both at her words and the sound of her footsteps. " Then..."

Out of slight curiosity, he turns to her--

" Maybe you'd like to come to my place or something...?" She bashfully suggests, tucking her hands between the range of her chest and lower neck, closing her eyes and selling that opportunistic look.

" That's an extreme way of trying to get close to someone..." Aqua blandly calls her out.

" I have no choice, you know? I'm still a celebrity." She explains, not betraying how embarrassing it was to even have said that. But getting his attention remained her priority above all else. " I can't

exactly just ask you to head to a Cafe shop for a chat, and there's no private rooms really available yet since it's not open during the day..."

A chat? Was that really all you wanted? Aqua glances at her. He doesn't understand what her motives might be just yet, in fact, her persistence still remains a mystery. At first he really didn't want to bother unraveling what that is, intending to just blow her off till' she'd give up on him. But to go so far as to request him in a way that suggested impure scenarios-- in the context of a chat --maybe she had something more to say, something more than he thinks.

" Oh, I get it." Aqua says, " In that case...I think I might know a place--"

Ding! A text notification interrupts him, he fetches his phone from his pocket and sees that a message was sent from Director Gotanda.

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**Contact: Director** 🎬📱

**Director:**

**Yo, genius kid. Sorry about this, but it's a bad time for you to swing by today like usual. That dang woman is forcing me to help her clean up the place, and I'm afraid it might take up the whole day. Unless you wanna help or something ( greatly appreciated ) then you can stop by.**

**Aqua:**

**I understand. I won't bother you today then.**

**Director:**

**No, wait. Please come help me!**

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" Looks like that's a no-go..." Aqua muttered, exiting the director's contact.

Kana stares at him curiously. " What's a no-go?"

" Since you wanted to chat, I was thinking of taking you to the director's place so we could chat there.....but unfortunately, he

messaged me saying it wasn't the best time." He ignores the last part where the director was begging him to come help him clean.

" Ah..." Kana blushes a bit, facing the ground and hiding the small smile etched across her lips.

So he must feel the same... She thought, blissfully. Small imaginative hearts begin to pop all around her, providing herself her own atmosphere as she mumbles to herself happily about the chance she's been given on this wonderful day...

" Hm.... I guess I'll have to adjust the place..." He says to himself, quietly, dialing a certain contact and placing the phone next to his ear. Waiting for him to pick up.

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" Hm? A private booth?"

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" Yeah, I suppose one is available. Not many would book one here but..."

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" Okay, I understand. I'll prepare one immediately."

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" It's not a problem, Aqua. I'll see you here."

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The call ends, Beryl places his phone back on the table. His co-workers looked over at him, curiously.

Feeling their obvious gazes, Beryl decides to answer them. " My brother wants to appoint a private booth here."

" Aqua is coming here?" Tako asked, surprise being written all over her expression. She and Hayate have heard plenty of Aqua and Ruby, but have never actually gotten the chance to meet them. So if the older triplet is actually going to be here, then this would be quite a first meeting.

" A private booth? Here?" Hayate tilts his head, " This is like the last place anyone would want a private booth in..."

Upon saying that, Hayate immediately snaps his head around to see if that woman was lurking around, his face resembling previous trauma from what she did to him that day. After seeing that lady luck was on his side, since Tamako wasn't around, he releases a quick sigh of relief.

" What for?" Tako asked.

" He wants a place he could privately chat with someone. They're already nearby, so this is the quickest choice." Beryl replied.

" Who's he with?" Hayate asked.

" You'll see." Beryl keeps his two co-workers guessing for an answer while he proceeds to the manager's office. " For the meantime, I'll make a request from Tamako-san to get a booth ready."

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" **Cafe ' Strawberryl ' ?** " Kana repeated, her brows furrowed in confusion.

" Mhm." Aqua answers with an affirmative hum. " It's the only



nearby place with a private booth available."

" Somehow I feel a feeling of dread running through me just by hearing the name....." Kana whispered to herself, wearing a deep expression. " I wonder why...?"

It somehow...irked her.

Somehow it felt.....*horribly familiar...*

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" Nice to see you again, senpai."

" ...."

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**" WHY DID YOU BRING ME HERE OF ALL PLACES?!"**

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Arima Kana's dread was immediately answered upon seeing the younger brother's complexion. She should've known from the start! Strawberry's ' Beryl ' was related to none other than this....this disrespectful junior! The one who shares the same flesh and blood with his sister!

Aqua sighs. " You wanted to chat, right? This was the only place I could think of at the moment." he says, before nodding to Beryl with an appreciative gesture. " Thanks for setting this up on short notice. I apologize if it was any trouble again."

" No need. Tamako-san was ecstatic to finally meet you in person. She had no problem whatsoever in setting this booth up to be as comfy as possible for you guys." Beryl waves it off, settling down the tray he was carrying full of shortcakes and coffee on the house due to Tamako's hospitality.

" Are you on break, Beryl?"

" No. But things aren't busy right now until later, so I guess you could I am?"

" Then why don't you take a seat with us?"

" NO! Anything but that!" Kana immediately interjects, catching the attention of both brothers. Her face showed utter disapproval at the offer, shaking her head vehemently in a rejecting motion.

" I promise my little brother will behave if you're worried about him teasing you." Aqua says to assure her, shooting said little brother a glance to get his affirmation. " Right?"

" Oh yeah, definitely. I'll behave." Or so Beryl says, but his eyes clearly glittered with mischief.

" I'm not believing that--!"

" I'll take you up on your offer then, Aqua." Beryl, without further question, slips in the seat beside Aqua. Beryl exuded a smug aura that affected Kana's overall mood.

Aqua, who acted as the middleman for the two, easily sensed the tension radiating mostly from Kana's side. Despite knowing this would happen, he figured not inviting Beryl to sit with them after he followed through with Aqua's request immediately would be quite distasteful from his end. The least he can do is have Beryl enjoy his break with the sweets he presented them.

Just as Aqua was about to start a conversation, suprisingly enough, it was Beryl who spoke first.

" Senpai, now that you're here, it really has me rethinking the way I acted to you earlier."

" Huh?" Kana was suprised, *was he really going to apologize?*

" And for that, I would like to apologize." Beryl bows his head slightly to her direction. " What I said was wrong, and it lacked courtesy."

Aqua raises a brow. *Don't tell me you're going to...*

Kana was confused, but felt delighted upon receiving an apology from him. She gives him a small smile. *Maybe this sibling wasn't as bad as the other.....he gets a point above!* She enthusiastically thinks.

" Is that so? Well, since I'm a mature girl. There's no reason for me not to accept your heartfelt apology--"

*" After all, it's been a while since I've seen you in any feature films. So please do forgive my rudeness for not remembering you."*

" Eh?"

Kana's heart was suddenly impaled by his words that acted as a sharp spear.

As blood trickled down the corners of her mouth once more, she felt her heart bleeding out as well. Aqua watched as Kana was still processing the attack, looks like the pain was felt but the event has

yet to register, an act of denial labeled itself on her expression. It's clear that she'd rather forget everything that happened in the past two minutes.

Before Aqua could reprimand his younger brother, they were interrupted once more, this time by Tako who opened the door with an urgent expression on her face.

" Beryl, sorry to interrupt whatever this is, but get outta there! The first wave's coming!" She said in a panic before rushing out again.

Beryl's expression turns serious, and so he stands up. " I'll leave you two then. I've gotta get back to work."

" Maybe that's for the best," Aqua says with a pointed look towards Kana. " You broke her within the first few minutes. I can't imagine what else would happen if you'd stayed longer."

" Pfft," Beryl could only manage a snicker before walking out of the private booth, leaving the two of them alone to converse. Or well, leaving Aqua alone to piece back Arima Kana.

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As soon as Beryl stepped back into the battlefield, all of the enemies eyes snapped onto him. Like predators spotting their prey, once again, the cafe was bustling with female customers. It was almost intimidating by how quickly their numbers could expand, it really has Beryl rethinking about using this job as a cover investigation spot in the first place, perhaps this was one of his few lapses in judgement that he'd have to pay dearly for.

But there was no use complaining now, especially with Tamako's burning gaze shooting through his side, telling him to save the regrets for later and focus on the task at hand. She'll also do the same. And with that, he adjusts his hat and grabs his notepad and pen.

" So, whose order is it going to be first?"

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It was another usual afternoon, it was relatively cloudy today when you compare it to the blazing heat from days before. For the woman clad in all sorts of layers, it was well appreciated. As she stepped into the cafe, she was surprised to see the waves of girls surrounding the young boy who worked there, she didn't really catch his name yet.

" Oh, it's you again. Good afternoon, you're a lot earlier than usual, huh?" The girl at the register greeted her with a polite smile. The woman looks down to her name card, ' Tako ', was her name.

" Hi, good evening to you too. Uhm..." The lady glances to the young boy hastily writing down orders while simultaneously shutting down any flirtatious attempts from the heaps of them. And Tamako busily juggling herself between tables, placing down trays, making small talk, and still portraying her cheery demeanor that many customers have come to love.

" This seems like a busy time....should I come back later? I'm worried that my order will take a while--"

" What? No! This isn't a problem at all, Madam." Tako insists, " We'll have your order ready just like the rest. You can order right now since the rest of them are trying to flirt with our mascot over there." She seemed to chuckle at the last part.

*Mascot...* The woman eyes said mascot with discerning eyes. Though one couldn't really tell since she wore shades to hide them. For the 2 weeks, ever since she'd begun regularly visiting this cafe, she always felt that boy's gaze for whatever reason. And it's not just because of mere coincidence, or in a flirtatious manner-- it was curiosity. And while that is normal considering her get-up, it wasn't just curiosity alone. It was....unbridled suspicion. Which in turn made her curious as to what he's trying to see of her.

Even now, as he's surrounded by them, each time she looks away to talk to Tako-san. She could feel his gaze glancing at her in that free second.

" Very well," The woman smiles. " I'll have my usual then, please."

" Gotcha."

*Today she plans to unravel the curiosity they both have for each other.*

*And something is telling her that the boy was thinking the same.*

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" Hey, do you have any videos of your previous acting stored somewhere?" Kana, after rebooting, asked.

" You're never going to see them." Aqua immediately shuts her down, reaching for a cookie and eating it. " I wasn't thinking straight at the time, and I would rather not talk about it."

Kana smiles. " Is that so...?"

" I was under the false impression that I had talent, and the films paid dearly for it." Aqua roughly added. The look he gave was clearly hiding something, according to Kana's intuition, but it didn't feel like a complete lie either...

Kana hums, thoughtfully. It would be a shame if it really were true, and this might sound like a stark contrast to how she'd thought of others back then during her child acting days. But Aqua then, and in her belief-- even now. Holds some sort of talent for acting. She believes wholeheartedly that if he were to willfully show her, she'd be impressed just as she was that day, when she swore she'd never lose to him again.

" So what I'm taking from this is that I'd have to convince you into acting again, yes?" She smugly says.

" Not happening." He utterly denies, which only fueled Kana's urge even more.

Leaning closer across the table, she eyes him with determination. " You know, there's this project I'm actually playing as the female lead in. And not all the roles are filled yet..." Her pinkish-red orbs narrow in business mode.

" I can talk to a higher-up and get you a role, y'know~"

" I won't do it." Aqua casually denies again.

" Oh come on!" Kana exclaims, exasperated at facing his indifference. " What will it take to get you to say ' yes '?" She asked.

" Literally nothing." He answered, which only caused Kana to pout.

" There's *got* to be something." She stubbornly insisted.

" What's the project even called, anyway?" He decided to ask.

" ' I'll go with sweet today '. It's a TV drama based on a popular shoujo manga," Kana grumbles.

Aqua pauses at that, he recognizes that media.

" ' Sweet Today '?" He repeated, to which Kana picked up on.

Seeing the look of recognition flickering in his blue eyes, Kana immediately jumped on the topic with glee.

" You heard of it?" She asked as a test.

" Anyone who dabbles in directing without knowing anything about it would be a fraud. It's not just popular, but a highly renowned work." Aqua details.

" Interested then?!" Kana fires the most important question.

To which Aqua responds the same. " I told you, I'm through with acting." He shuffles a bit further away upon seeing how she closed the distance from across the table.

" If I pitch you in for the role, then chances are it could be yours, y'know? Would you really miss on this chance?" She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively, a confident smile accompanying the aura.

Aqua grunts, averting his eyes from her, trying to focus on the delicious pastry he was currently eating.

" The producer of the show, Kaburagi-san, has a soft spot for me, you know?" She flaunts her influence as a way to get him on board.....but...

" ' Kaburagi' ?" Aqua suddenly repeated.

His switch of tone caught Kana by surprise, and before she knew it, Aqua cranked his head back towards her again with a rather curious look.

" Is his full name ' **Kaburagi Masaya** ' ?"

He posed his question with a light, but serious cadence.

Kana tilts her head, confused by the sudden shift in his tone. Despite that, she answered.

" Uh, yeah?"

Kaburagi Masaya....

To think he'd hear that name after quite some time, he was already familiarized with it. This person.....was one of Ai's previous contacts.

~~~~~

***There are three mobile phones Ai left behind when she died.***

***Among them was a work phone and a personal phone. And those only had private communication logs exchanged with fellow group members or agency staff.***

***So the only thing left was the third phone, the most troublesome one of all. And the same phone Ai used before she ever became pregnant.***

***The model was from several generations ago, so finding a replacement battery was no easy task....but with enough determination...***

***" I got the battery." Beryl announced.***



*The task could be done.*

*" Thank you, just place it right there." Aqua says, not breaking his focus from screwing the phone open.*

*" I thought mom was clumsy, but..." Beryl shoots a glance to the two other phones. " She was a lot more careful than we thought."*

*Beryl was suprised to find out that their mother was awfully meticulous in how she kept their secret. So it bugs him how their so called ' father ' still managed to track down their location....unless.... Ai still had some way of contacting him.*

*With that,*

*It's possible that she, out of her own volition, chose to share the address herself.*

*" Yeah..." Aqua agreed. " But what do you think are the chances of this phone containing the clues we need, Beryl?" He asked before successfully screwing the panel open. To which he the did a quick check for any missing components besides the battery.*

*" There's a good chance this might be the one," Beryl sighs. " If not, then we'd have to look elsewhere."*

*" Mn..." Letting out a short hum of agreement, Aqua inserts the new battery in the phone and screws back close the panel.*

*.*

*.*

*.*

*And then he turns it on.....only to be met with a password screen.*

*" Now this is a pain." Beryl sighs before glancing at Aqua. " How much time are you willing to put into this?" Referring to the passcode.*

*" Whatever time it needs." Aqua answers, already putting in random digits as his first attempt.*

*' This passcode is incorrect! Lockdown, 30 seconds...'*

*" And it has a lockdown." Aqua muttered.*

*Beryl sighs before leaving the room for a bit, and then coming back with a notebook and pen. Placing it on the table, he began writing the password Aqua falsely inputted and marked it as the first.*

*Words needn't be exchanged between the two brothers. Only action took place. There was already an understanding, and that would be their common goal; To find any clues that could help track down the culprit behind her murder. No matter how long it would take.*

*Whether it be days....weeks...months...*

*Even years.*

*They spent a ton of time and effort, typing new passwords everyday. The total amount they could type with the inclusion of the 30 second phone lockdown after a failed input in half a day, was rounded off to a 100. The total they typed within a month reached 1,000.*

*Each failed input was written and marked in Beryl's notebook. They each took turns trying to throw a crack at it.*

*Day after day.*

*Until...*

~~~~~

The 45,510th attempt.

Coincidentally, that same number of attempts, ended up being the correct password.

' 45510 '

It took years till' they finally managed to crack it. 4 years. But it was worth it, the phone retained many of Ai's old contacts and email addresses. names that shouted connections to big deal business or organization-- and among many of those names was...

" Kaburagu Masaya..." He whispered to himself, his fists clenching at his lap, a dark look invaded his expression.

A clue was finally near...

" Come on, think about it a bit more. Join me. Most of the actors in the set are actually just around our age, so there's need to be intimidated! " Throughout the entire time Aqua was thinking to himself, Kana was continuing her attempts at selling the job to him.

" The male lead has a girlfish face-- he looks really cute!"

" I'm in. "

....

" Huh?" She turns to him, blinking in suprise. Did she hear that right--?

" Reach out to the producer for me." He said.

Eh...?

Then she lets out a gasp.

D-Don't tell me you're....

' The male lead has a girlish face-- he looks really cute! '

" Let's do this." He simply said.

Kana stares at him for a moment, rethinking every previous thought she just had...

.....

Ah...

I see. I must've mistaken it, huh?

What a ridiculous thought I had for a moment!

" I'm looking forward to seeing you act, Aqua! "

~~~~~

" I believe this is your order, erm..." Beryl checks the name before looking back at the woman again. " Sagami-san, correct?"

*This was the perfect moment*, Beryl thinks. Currently, Tamako was attending to the many other patrons in the shop, serving them their orders and such. While Beryl managed to break free of the crowd that surrounded him so he could serve this one order to the object of his suspicion. When the woman turned to him, he couldn't see through the color of her eyes because of her shades, the only visible skin he could see is from her bits of her face and her gloveless hands, of which she placed aside for now.

" Yes, that would be me." Her tone was soft, the same as when she first entered the cafe that very day. " Thank you." Sliding off her

mask, she shoots him a small smile.

" It's my pleasure," He says before placing down her strawberry shortcake and coffee on the table. " Please enjoy."

" Thank you, I will, um..." She pauses, staring at his name tag in surprise. Before looking up at him again. " Beryl?" She said his name as if it were a question.

He was used to the confusion he gets whenever they hear of his name.

" Yes, that is my name. Though it's just a nickname for ' Goldenberyl '." He explained.

She raises a brow. " Goldenberyl?" She said, sounding even more perplexed.

" It was my mother who named me." He adds, " I know it may come off as a strange naming sense but..."

" No, no. It's quite....unique." She smiles kindly. " Never in my life would I have thought to meet a person with a name like that." A short giggle follows after.

" Tell me, does this name have any relation to the name of the cafe?" She asked, looking quite interested.

" Ah...well...yes." Beryl's stoic demeanor quickly fell off as soon as she mentioned that. " It's embarrassing..." He was ashamed of the fact, " I swear I had nothing to do with it though....it was the owner--"

" It's business, right?" She interrupts, showing an understanding look. " She says you were her marketing tactic when we last talked."

*She's only swimming in profit because of you, kid.* The woman mused.

*" Beryl! Help! These girls are going crazy over here! "*

Suddenly, the voice of Beryl's co-worker barreled its way into their conversation. Beryl mentally sighs, this wasn't a good time.

But if he tries to delay it any further, he'll get an earful-- *or an ear pull* --from Tamako-san.

" Seems like that's my cue to leave." Beryl said. The woman laughs, waving at him.

" Then you should go. Wouldn't want your co-worker to die in a place like this, would you?" She joked.

" *BERRRYLLL!!!* "

*No choice then...* Beryl thinks.

" Suppose I don't." Beryl answers with a shrug, but then he accidentally drops his tray.

" Oh gosh!" The woman uttered her surprise, Beryl quickly bends down to grab the tray.

" Sorry, lost my grip there..." He apologizes, but as he got up with the tray in hand, his eyes took a split-second to discreetly glance at her laptop screen.

*Hm...nothing of interest.* He concluded. The screen only showed a normal window, that showcased today's news. But still, something itched at him telling him that there was still something off about this woman. Her awareness was excellent, seeing as how she easily tracked his footsteps from previous attempts, thus it's only logical to assume that she anticipated this interaction just as much as he had, right? But then that raises the question; *What suspicion does he really have on her?*

At first, he thought she was a stalker....

Someone that could pose a danger, similar to that situation from before. A situation he failed to stop. But with this, he's more certain than ever that that isn't the case. Not for now at least.

From what he could conclude during their short talk, she didn't seem too bad of a person. She sounded kind, and she didn't really pose as a threat to anyone he could think of at the moment. She matches the ' normal regular of the cafe ' persona quite well, which

means that he should possibly drop all questions he has about her.

After getting up, he shoots her a small smile. A smile that'd been practiced over the years with Ruby's help.

" I'll get going now, but before that, if you're okay with it. May I ask for your full name?" He then quickly adds. " Since you know mine and all."

" Sure." She nods without hesitation. " It's **Yuki**. Sagami Yuki."

**Yuki...?** The name rung a bell in his head for a moment, but he doesn't break his act just yet.

" Pleasure to meet you, I'm Hoshino Goldenberyl." He reintroduces himself. And then he bows politely, " I'll excuse myself now."

Yuki nods with a smile before resuming with her work whilst enjoying her shortcake and coffee.

.....

But upon seeing that his figure was busy serving the customers again. Yuki quickly moves her mouse cursor and switches window to a document file. It was a good decision to prepare a decoy window, after all. Something did tell her that the boy could try something like that ' accidental drop'.

.....

Meanwhile, the name keeps ringing in Beryl's head as he worked.

*A name....that felt quite familiar...*

*Yuki...*

*Yuki...*

*Yuki...*

Beryl wonders if it's possible that the woman may be...

.....

He stops that thought from going any further. The more he thinks about it, the more unlikely it just sounds. Or does it?

He sighs.

*I shouldn't think about it too much....it really may not be the person I think it is... and I doubt we'd ever actually cross paths again,* He thinks to himself as he recalls the image of a girl he knew in his past life. A girl he knew from *that place*.

The name is common anyways, He had to consider that fact most of all before coming up with assumptions. Besides, why would it matter? All he can recall of her are just a few stray memories here and there-- *but there was one memory that stood out* --though he wouldn't like to admit.

It would be a lie to say that he wouldn't enjoy the chance of meeting her again. Just to see if she was doing alright.

But it's just a passing thought, he shouldn't sink too deep into into it.

Not when he already has priorities set at the moment.

~~~ End ~~~

A chapter full of Kana to give her some bit of spotlight.

And the prologue from Chapter 0 finally ties into the story! Some changes will happen from here, and while next chapter is still going to be about Aqua and Kana short acting gig

adventure rehab or whatever--

Now that Yuki and Berly have introduced themselves to each other, officially. This finally opens up the opportunity for ' storyline ' i talked about from earlier to take place!

It might take one or two more chapters before i can finally set it in proper motion, but i'm really excited to write it.

hope you guys will look forward to it too!

See ya in the next one~

5. I'll go with Sweet Today...

" An actor is a fool for God. "

- Gerardine Clark

~~~~~

*" I'm look forward to seeing you act, Aqua."*

.....

*" Ah, but, um..." She gives him a sheepish look. " That being said, the situation on set is kinda....all over the place. So bear with that, okay?"*

*" Hm?" Aqua wondered what she meant by that.*

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" What?! You're gonna be in a TV drama, Aqua?!"

" Why'd you tell her..." Aqua shoots Miyako a glare.

The older woman sat there, unfazed by the boy's staring, and remained as calm as ever while doing her work. " Well, you weren't going to tell her yourself. Someone had to." She shrugged.

" Besides, doing publicity for entertainers is part of the agency's job. So think of it as a practice." Miyako smirked, which only made Aqua glower.

Beryl was just casually strolling through his phone, with nothing much to add in the conversation. Besides, he and Aqua already had a talk as they walked home together from the Cafe. The real reason Aqua joined the show...

" I can't believe it," Ruby was grinning as she poured herself a glass of milk. Her eyes glittered with reminiscence. " Mon did say....that one day maybe I'd become an idol and you'd become an actor..."

" I see you haven't forgotten at all, brother." She says, fondly.

Aqua averted his eyes from her and towards his entangled hands. Contemplating on her words, all he could think of the moment was that she was far from the truth. Becoming an actor for now, is but a means to reach the end goal. He had no passion for it, none at all. It was just a means to find the person who blew out their star.

I just want to get close to that producer....Kaburagi... Aqua's eyes darken at the thought of that man possibly being the answer. To test his DNA if it matches with him, and if it does....then...

" Oh? And what about Beryl, hm?" Miyako glances to Ruby, curious about what Ai's final wishes for Beryl.

Beryl's thumb stops scrolling upon hearing.

" For Beryl? Hm..." Ruby hummed thoughtfully, trying to recall.

But Beryl recalled everything, perfectly.

Her words. Her last words to him.

Her voice....

.....

" Beryl....will you become a therapist? A chef?"

.....

" Which one, I wonder..."

.....

The feeling of her comforting him for the final time, laying her chin atop his head and trying to hum a happy tune, as if it were just another day.

.....

" Well....it doesn't matter. Beryl, listen to me closely... "

.....

He remembered her smile. The most sincere smile she'd ever put out, as tears streaked down her beautiful eyes.

.....

" Whatever you choose in the future....or whoever you become... "

.....

How his tears mixed in with the taste of bitter iron.

.....

" Just know this..."

.....

As she said the words he'd never thought she'd say...

Words that he'll cherish till his final days.

Words that he'll no longer hesitate to say to the family he has left.

.....

" *Mama loves you...*"

.....

Words.....he wished he could've said back.

" Ah, now I remember!" Ruby twirls around, facing Miyako with an optimistic expression. " How can I forget?"

Unbeknownst to Beryl at the moment, Ruby noticed it. The way his eyes took a dip back into the memories. The same somber look he always has on, when he thinks deeply about something, and often he gets himself lost in it.

" Mama said..." She speaks, " That Beryl will become my secretary one day!" *To bring him back.*

Beryl's eyes widened, as he craned his head to her in slight befuddlement. Miyako also looked surprised, she wondered if that's what Ai really said. It wouldn't be a surprise if she did...

" Isn't that right, Beryl?" Ruby decided to ask him.

Beryl's eyes lighten up a bit. A small smile threatening to break free on his lips, but he drowns it out with a sarcastic chuckle.

" How brazen of you to say." Is all he remarked.

" Hey, you know I'm right!" Ruby jokingly insists.

He sighs, shaking his head at her. But secretly thanking her for always bringing him back to today. It doesn't happen that often anymore, whenever anything related to Ai's death is brought up. But the human mind is....to put simply, a conscience that thinks sporadically. Most days, it thinks steadily, but some days...it can go out of line and cause you to sink deeper into your thoughts than expected.

When that happens....you'll need someone or something to get you back on the boat. He concludes. *Thank you, Ruby.*

" Every single time you think you're right, you get twice the amount of wrongs." He jokingly responds.

" Hey!" Ruby pouts.

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" So, what's the show called?" Ruby asked Miyako, taking a seat on the chair next to the woman.

Miyako opens up a new tab and begins typing. " It's called ' **I'll go with Sweet Today** '. It's based on a shoujo manga with the same name." She explained before hitting enter.

Ruby's eyes lit up in recognition as she lets out a gasp. " Oh! I know that one, ' *Sweet Today* ', that's the manga in Aqua's room. That was a fun read!"

" Don't get stuff from my room without asking." Aqua interjected.

" This one right here?" Beryl says, holding up the manga he got from Aqua's room just a few seconds ago.

Ruby nods, affirmative. " That's the one!"

Aqua glares at Beryl. " I literally just--" He cuts himself off with a defeated sigh, " Never mind. I give up." He palms his face tiringly.

Beryl shrugs and begins skimming through the pages...

" It's a drama produced by a recently established internet TV station." Miyako continues to relay the information from the screen and Ruby also peeked over the woman's shoulder to read through as well.

" It's slated to have six episodes in total, three of which have already been released. But..." The woman's eyes narrow in on the castings. " It seems the casting is mostly made up of new actors, and the production is on the smaller scale of things. Similar to the one you partook in all those years ago, Aqua."

Aqua doesn't respond, only listening in as he sips his drink silently.

" What role will Aqua play in the show?" Ruby asked.

" He'll play as the villain," Miyako answers. " He'll show up in the final episode."

" Sounds fitting. He has a sinister-looking face, after all!" Ruby ruthlessly says.

" Oh, shut up." Aqua rebukes, only causing Ruby to giggle unfazed.

But then her jewel-like eyes land themselves on Beryl's figure.

" Ah, but Beryl could also be perfect for the role. There's nothing scarier in this world than his emotionless robot-like expression!" She cheekily says.

" Besides your horrible grades." Beryl effortlessly replies, and then flips to the next page.

" Die." She instantly begins handchopping the top of his head, but to no effect whatsoever.

" *Die.Die.Die.Die.Die.Die.Die--*" She said repeatedly with each chop, but for Beryl it felt no less than getting hit by a fly.

Miyako chuckles before clicking the show with her mouse.

" Since it's an internet streaming show, why don't we watch it right now?"

Ruby immediately halts her assault on Beryl's head and runs back to Miyako's side with an excited look. " Oh, I wanna watch it!"

" Beryl, what about you?" Miyako asked.

" I'm good--"

" No, you're watching it with me!" Before Beryl could even finish his sentence, Ruby had already dragged him to her side without further question. Ruby then shoots a look at Aqua, expecting him to do the same.

He sighs, walking himself over to Miyako's side as well. " Whatever..."

Finally, the triplets arrived to watch the first episode of the show.

" I have high hopes that they did it well." Ruby smiles.

" I feel like we're going to regret this..." Beryl muttered with a slight frown, already setting himself up for disappointment. *After all, most manga don't translate well to live action...*

" Right there with you on that one." Aqua shared the same opinion, he never watched the episode himself just yet but he did do a bit of research on the show beforehand. *And the reviews aren't really...*

But before he could finish that thought, Miyako clicked ' Play '.

~~~~~

***After all, everyone only thinks about themselves....***

.....

" Oh, it's loli-senpai!" Ruby calls out.

Everyone pays close attention, interested to see how this will go.



Aqua, especially, since he's curious to see how far Kana's acting skills have grown since the last time they've met.

.....

*" Hey,so...." A boy calls out to her.*

*" Hm?" She turns to him...*

*" There something you want?" She asked.*

*" Not really, I was just chasing some cat and happened to come across you."*

.....

" What....What am I looking at?" Beryl asked, genuinely confused.

Aqua sighs. *As expected, if it were anything really worth praise for, then it'd have a better rating...*

Miyako and Ruby looked offended by what's happening.

.....

*" What the heck?" She smiles a bit, looking bashful.*

*" Oh well look at that," The boy grins. " You're a lot cuter when you smile."*

*" H-Hey now, don't tease me like that..." She tucks a a loose of hair behind her ear.*

.....

" This is depressing..." Beryl muttered.

Miyako and Ruby remained silent, or maybe it's because they were left frozen and shell-shocked by how.....underperforming this all is?

.....

*" Hey buddy! Hands off my girl!" A new character enters the scene.*

.....

"....I'm done." Beryl leaves the scene.

He could no longer handle the cringe radiating off this show.

.....

*" Stop fighting!!! "*

.....

*\*Plop\**

It didn't take another minute for Miyako to confidently decide to cut the episode right there. There was no need to continue.

" Wait...was ' Sweet Today ' really like that?!" Ruby had to ask after snapping back to her senses, turning to Miyako with a worried look.

" On the whole, was that the feel it had to it, I wonder...?" Miyako, who knew nothing about the manga, was the one with more questions here.

" The direction is on point, so I wouldn't go as far as to say that it was unwatchable..." Ruby bit her lips, feeling herself flinch from the aftermath of it all. She palmed her face in embarrassment for the episode-- and the show itself.

Aqua stood at the back, skimming through the pages of the manga to confirm his suspicions, there were plenty of add-ons to the scenes and some were entirely original scenes that didn't make sense in the context either.

" It had all those original characters that weren't even in the

manga..." She muttered.

" The production side must want to feature as many actors as possible, then, huh..." Miyako thinks.

Ruby snatches the manga from Aqua's hands and begins skimming through it herself-- not without Aqua giving her an annoyed expression though.

" Also, the story didn't unfold like that in the manga, did it?" Ruby asked as she tried to concentrate on each page, wondering if she really missed the big details.

" It didn't." Beryl returns to the scene, gently prying the manga off of Ruby's grip and going back to the page where stopped earlier. " Usually, live action adaptations try their best to compact the entire story into one season. And usually, that never goes well." He answers her.

" Plenty of scenes either get compact or cut out entirely. Character development gets minimized in order to save film time, and since this is made by a low budget production-- then the quality is also just as questionable. " He said.

" And the acting..." Ruby shivers.

" It's a set of actors who haven't gone through any prior experience." Aqua says before snatching his manga back from Beryl's hands, causing the latter to frown at him.

*" Hey, I was reading that." Beryl muttered.*

*" You got it from my room without permission." Aqua glares.*

*" Can I borrow it then?" Beryl asked.*

*" No." Aqua said.*

*" ....And here you ask why I got it without permission..." Beryl grumbled.*

" But...the acting...still it's just..." Ruby was shaking.

" *It's downright awful! There's no other way to put it!*" She yelled.

" Now, that's a bit too blunt." Miyako says.

" Besides, wasn't Loli-senpai better at acting than that?" Ruby ask out of desperation.

" True," Beryl agrees with her. " Maybe she's already past her prime, prematurely." He comments.

~~~~~

" Shut the hell up! She really said that?! Tell your sister she can drop dead!"

" I see you still have a foul mouth..." Aqua sighs.

The next day, Aqua and Kana convened once again at a private booth at the popular cafe, Strawberryl. While the two were seated next to each other this time, Beryl was seated across, once again enjoying his break for what it's worth. Munching on a few cookies and slurping a strawberry milk frappe, he was losing himself in short blissful delight.

" And what do you mean past my prime?!" Kana turns to Beryl, pointing at him. " This is my prime, you hear me?!"

" If this is your prime then that's just sad." Beryl replied. " Might as well give up on acting, senpai."

" Uuuu...!" Steam was practically coming out of Kana's ears, she turns to Aqua with tearful eyes, " Tell me again, why is *he* here...!"

" Just....bear with it." Aqua strains.

Kana pouts, before glaring at Beryl again. " I really don't like you. You're just as-- *if not more* infuriating than your sister."

" Wow," Beryl's eyes lightened up at her disgust. " That's the nicest compliment-- or well, sorta compliment --you've given me, senpai."

" Tsk," Kana really was annoyed with Beryl. She didn't remember him to be so much of a brat from back then, though, when she first noticed him. She really knew nothing about him, and they've never once spoken to the other.

" Forgive me for his teasing, Arima." Aqua collects her attention this time, " Despite what they said about your acting, both him and Ruby actually expected greater from you. In the show it just felt underwhelming so--"

" You know, there are hardly any high schoolers that can act as well as I can." She interrupts, " And if I wanted to, I could've easily surpassed your expectations of me to new heights."

" Then why didn't you?" Aqua asked.

"..." Kana pauses, her anger from earlier slowly subsiding as she releases a deep sigh.

Crossing her legs, and leaning her chin on her palm as support, she tells him.

" This TV drama is meant to target the young female demographic that's into good-looking guys." She started off with a professional tone.

" And to do so, they feature a bunch of models they want to start promoting. They're just there to look pretty and catch attention, acting ability was a secondary concern." She muttered the last part with some underlying disappointment.

" But if they went with that strategy alone, the show would be a bust. That's why they casted me in the show, someone known for her acting chops, to make up for my co-stars lack of skill." She said.

" But your acting wasn't on point," Aqua narrows his eyes curiously. " Even I'm sure you could do much better than that."

" Obviously, I'm holding back." She rolls her eyes, releasing a huff. " Everyone there on the screen with me are ham actors!"

She clenches her fist, gritting her teeth. " I'm the only one in the cast who can act worth a damn!"

" Just imagine if I gave it my all in that situation-- it would easily expose how ham everyone's acting is, it'd be like a ham roast party!" She said, gesturing her hands to a table, describing the image of a ham buffet.

" Ham roast tastes good..." Beryl mumbles, clearly enjoying Kana's imagination. It just reminded him that he didn't get to eat a proper breakfast after exercise...

Ignoring Beryl's unrelated comment, Kana continues. " I'd like to put everything in my acting, you know. I mean, who would enjoy going out of their way to act poorly?" her mood slowly died, and to try and calm herself she takes a sip of her coffee drink before sighing again.

" But, the truth is, good acting and creating a good show are very different things."

Aqua and Beryl look to her, waiting for her to elaborate on that.

" It's no doubt that right from the planning stages. The seller's viewpoint was overly prioritized. There's no way it can be an entertaining show." Her tone now turned bitter.

" I still remember, during the filming of episode 1. The author of the manga visited, and as I turned to look at her reaction from being told of what was going to go down..." Kana clenches the hem of her skirt.

" Her disappointed look....was hard to bear." She said.

.....

" Despite that, the actors and behind-the-scenes staff all gave their best into making this show good, as best they could. In spite of how bad we're doing, the common goal we share is to just make this show a good show that could entertain everyone, especially the fans of the manga. We had to make do with what we got." She closes her eyes, releasing a calm breath.

" Even if I have to do lousy acting to make it work, I won't hesitate." she finishes. " I want to do everything I can to make this show watchable."

" Even if that means diminishing your reputation as an actor?" Aqua asked.

" If it's necessary." She answered.

" Even if...you don't like what you're doing?"

Kana pauses, the question came from none other than Beryl who stared at her with a testing expression. She takes a moment, to think carefully, honestly it's been the question she's always asked herself since the show began. It mocked her ability, and she hated having to hold herself back. But she's determined herself to make it work, somehow. Even at the expense of her own pride.

" Yes, even with that." She smiles past it. " As an actor, the most important part is communications skills. My feelings have nothing to do with it."

Aqua's eyes widened at that, hearing that line. It reminded him of the conversation he had with Director Gotanda from years ago. His very first lesson of being actor, though he didn't know it at the time. To hear it being repeated from Kana felt ironic, since she was the prime example of a person who didn't have such skills back when they were children. *She really has grown as an actress...*

"....Senpai, you're really amazing." Beryl suddenly uttered, catching both Aqua, and especially Kana in suprise.

" What?" She blurted out, confused.

" I respect your dedication to your career. It's really something else to see, in person, especially." Beryl places his now empty cup back on the table. " I humbly apologize for my prior critique at your acting from a while ago, it was over-reaching of me, when it's not even my field."

".....Are...are you serious?" She had to ask, looking at him suspiciously.

" I'm serious," Beryl nods. " It's a shame the production is failing to utilize your skills efficiently, senpai. From your work ethic alone, you are an outstanding actress."

"...."

She waited for a few seconds. And then a few more. And then more and more, till it turned to minutes. It was just silence in the booth as she processed what he just said. But upon seeing that there was no follow-up insult, she began to panic and turned to Aqua with a horrified look.

" D-Did someone kill your brother?!"

" Wow. Really? Right after I said something nice?" Beryl blandly reacts.

" C-Can you blame me!" Kana was flustered, " You never say anything nice! Not even to your own sister!" She points out.

" Sometimes I forget he can do that..." Aqua comments.

Beryl shoots him a look that said, ' *Are you for real?* ', before sighing to himself and getting up from his seat.

" At any rate, good luck to you both with the acting gig." He says, putting on his employee hat. " I've gotta work right now."

" Sure," Aqua nods. " Work hard."

Beryl responds with a hum before eventually leaving the room. Leaving Aqua and Kana alone in the intimate atmosphere of the private booth....

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" So, just making sure....." She whispers before leaning closer to Aqua, and pointing to the door Beryl just left from. " That was your brother just now, right--"

" It's not an imposter, Arima."

" Impossible..."

She seemed to be in disbelief, still. Aqua couldn't blame her, she doesn't know Beryl that well yet-- nor will she ever get to probably know him more on an intimate level. The only reason Aqua's got the upper-hand over most people is because they're related, they're siblings after all. But just being siblings didn't clear up the other various mysteries regarding his existence, there's something there-- a wall, almost. It's been that way since they were children and although he's soften up since her death. There's still something rooted within, beyond the small joy, beyond the anger, something akin to an emptiness or so.

But Aqua doesn't indulge himself further into Beryl's past background. He's said it before when they were kids, and he'll say it again; *It remains none of his business.*

Besides, he had something more important to ask Kana today.

" Arima. Actually, I have a favor to ask you..."

" Hm? What is it...?"

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" Well, it seems you're serving me again."

" It seems I am."

Beryl was met with the mysterious woman-- no, he can't exactly refer to her as that anymore. They've already exchanged introductions, he can identify her as Sagami Yuki.

" I noticed Tamako-san wasn't serving the entire day, is she here?" She asked as Beryl placed down her parfait and chocolate melt cake.

" She is," Beryl answers. " But she's been feeling unwell since she arrived."

" Will she be okay?"

Even without needing to see her eyes or brows furrow in worry, her tone and lip movement conveyed it just as well.

" She'll be okay." He assures her. And she sighs in relief.

The Cafe was unexpectedly quiet, with lesser girls coming in than usual. That immediately grabbed at the Strawberryl employees' attention but curiosity quickly spawned relief as they wouldn't have to deal with a near-endless mob of girls for today at least. Beryl, especially, shares that sentiment. It's a lot calmer, a lot peaceful here now.

Even so, Tamako wouldn't appreciate him slacking off and letting his guard down during his shift. And besides he wants to take no part in the disciplinary methods she used on Hayate the other week to make him become so obedient. Overtime, he returned to his old self, making jokes and throwing insults on Tako and Beryl's expense-- but he's become a lot more careful since then with the topic of ' when ' he can be himself. Especially when Tamako's presence was near.

" Enjoy." He finalizes with a bow of his head, as per the routine of any Strawberryl employee. He should return to his post.

As he was about to turn around with his tray in hand, Yuki unexpectedly calls out to him.

" Where are you off to?" She suddenly asked.

" Behind the counter." He answers.

She releases a huff, " I see. You really are a hard-worker, Tamako-san is lucky indeed." She muses before smiling and raising her glass of parfait towards him. " But since the Cafe is not that busy as usual, would you mind sparing me some company?"

" If this is your attempt of grooming a minor then it's a pretty bad attempt." Beryl raises a brow.

" You say that, and yet I can't count the amount of times I've caught you staring at me since I began my regular visits on my

hands alone." She replies, unfazed by his controversial remark to get an amusing reaction out of her. "if anything, it looks to be that you're attracted to me instead of the other way around, no?"

"...."

*Interesting...* Beryl muses. He was used to people becoming immediately repulsed when he pulls such comments. It was his method of preventing further conversation, or his daily amusement to just pull a fast one on any of those close to him for entertainment purposes. This woman however, responded with the same energy as him, and without needing a moment to think either.

She was already a person of interest in his eyes, under the concern of suspicion of course. But now a new theory arises; *What if she becomes a person of interest under the matter of friendship as well?*

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After accepting the offer, it doesn't take a second before Yuki slides over the strawberry parfait to Beryl's end. He looks at her, confused.

"Why did you slide it to me? You ordered it." He asked.

"Well, it'd be rude of me to have you keep me company while I indulge in these treats alone." She answers, gesturing for him to accept it. "Go on, I don't mind."

"...In that case, thank you." Beryl manages a small smile before accepting the parfait and then the small spoon Yuki also provided him.

"The cafe is a lot more quiet," Yuki hums. "It's rare."

"Mmm." Beryl hums accordingly, with the spoon of parfait still resting in his mouth.

"Actually, I'm glad you've taken my offer of sitting here for a while." Yuki says before taking in a piece of chocolate cake into her mouth. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Is it about me staring at you?" "It is about you staring at me."

The both of them said it at the same time. Silence befell upon them soon after, the longer Beryl locked eyes with Yuki's shades--the clearer it gets for him to see through it. Nearly. He could almost tell the color of her eyes if he tries to squint it. Meanwhile, Yuki masks her expression with a calm grin, when really she was running in all the possible factors that this kid could have a connection to something that might cause her problems in the future.

Tamako has made it clear that the kid was nothing to worry about, but Yuki's guts say otherwise. Perhaps one might call it paranoia, and maybe that's true for someone like Yuki who'd go the extra mile to keep everything about herself confidential until the time was right. Tamako was insistent on proving her wrong that she was willing to allow a few instances for Yuki to get up close and personal with the kid.

Beryl was pleased with the circumstances too, as he wanted to get more information of Sagami Yuki as well.

" Well, you are dressed highly suspicious for someone who insists she's not a predator." He points at her accusingly with his small spoon, " I'm simply looking at you out of concern for myself and everyone else who is in the cafe."

*He's a wisecrack, indeed...* Yuki thinks.

" Either that, or you're some famous celebrity in hiding when you go out into the public." He adds.

Yuki lets a chuckle escape her lips at that. " Fortunately, I'm neither. Though I would've much appreciated had you only assumed I was a celebrity first instead of a child predator."

" Then why do you dress like this if not the former nor the latter?" He finally gets the chance to ask.

" Oh, that's because I'm anxious of what I look like." She answers within a beat. " Despite how I may act, I'm quite shy as a person, you know?"

" That's..." Her smile ' dampens ', " Probably part of the reason why I...wanted to confront you this time about the staring." Her tone also sounds quiet at that.

"...."

Beryl sat there in surprise. *Was she serious?* He had to ask himself that. If the person he'd been suspecting this entire time was just some adult who's held deep-rooted social anxiety, then that'd be quite the table flip for his end. Being anxious does explain her choice of clothing, though a bit more exaggerated than commonplace, and it does explain how she usually picks the least occupied area of the cafe whenever she comes here. Away from all the other customers. But could he really believe that? It's itching at him, he can sense it, the lie spilling out of her mouth and yet it's woven so well coincidentally that it could really be just a misunderstanding.

And if her manner of speech this entire time was just her way of masking her nervousness then...

" I'm....sorry?" His apology came out confused, upon realizing that he quickly rephrases. " I mean, I'm sorry. if I made you uncomfortable, then that's really on me."

" No, it's okay now. Knowing your reason for staring at me-- It's fair to blame the fault on my attire. I guess I do attract attention even though that's precisely what I'm trying to avoid, huh." She laughs.

" I'm more surprised by how outgoing you sound despite being anxious." He comments.

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" May I ask you a question ?"

" Go ahead." Yuki says.

" During my time-- *staring* --" He starts, the apologetic emphasis aroused a giggle from Yuki. " I noticed that Tamako would talk to you a lot. In fact, she stopped me from serving you at first and would often take the job herself..."

" Ah...she really is such a good friend." Yuki sighs, " She saved me from the early panic of having to talk to a new person but....in exchange, I was constantly attacked by your -- *ahem* -- staring." She

also puts an emphasis, amusing Beryl a bit from this exchange.

Seems like that's going to be a topic they're never going to let go...

" But to answer your question. I knew Tamako-san since I was in my teens, she was like a sister figure even though she was my friend, you could say. So that explains our closeness." She explains it plainly, Beryl was hoping there's more to be add but in that context there really wasn't anything else to add.

And if he tries to pry, he doubts she'd actually give him important details. If her relationship with Tamako-san really is as normal as she says, then that just adds more substance to her claim of being a socially anxious person. It does make sense for her so called ' sister ' figure to take it upon herself to serve Yuki and not letting some other stranger do it.

" I see. That explains it." He decides to close the topic there before Yuki could get suspicious. He doesn't necessarily believe that she's being truthful with him entirely--perhaps hiding the juicy details from him. But the same could be said for him, he's trying his best to discern her character.

*And her name... ' Yuki '.*

*It's really doing a round on him, if he were to be honest...*

" Is it my turn to ask a question now?" She perks up.

" Since when did this turn into a similar game of 21 questions?" He asked.

" Since you shot me with that first question of course." She answered.

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" Well, in that case. Go ahead. It's the least I could do for making you feel uncomfortable, and you even treated me to this parfait.... so...." He allows it this time.

" That boy who entered the cafe with that girl earlier. He shared similar appearance to you. Is he your twin brother?"

" Older twin brother, yes. Though actually we're triplets since I also have an older sister." He nods.

Yuki gasps, a bit amazed or so it looks. Somehow, Beryl can sense the shocked eyes behind her shades from this revelation, it's not common to meet triplets after all.

" Does he also share a similar naming sen--"

" He does share a similar name, yes. Our mother named all of us three after gems." Beryl quickly clarifies.

" Haha, now that's really unique. All three of you." She softly says.

" Yeah." He nods before sitting back straight again. " Anyways, my turn to ask a question."

" Go ahead."

" What's your job, Sagami-san?" He asked.

" I'm a journalist." She answers firmly.

*Journalist.....so that's what she's been doing with her laptop all this time huh...* He thinks. But also, it's quite...

" Journalist? Isn't that quite a competitive field?" He questions.

" Yes, I'm suprised you know that." She said.

" Well, you learn a ton of things when you can't sleep and decide to scroll through youtube shorts but anyways--" He goes back to his point. " But don't journalists have to organize and gather interesting stories for their publishing company? Not to mention the amount of interviews you have to fight for when the opportunity comes. For an anxious person like you, that sounds like hell."

She sighs, " It is, but I do have a passion for this job. You see, I want to craft the biggest story the world has ever seen. A true real-life based story.....that will stun millions." She grins.

*A story that can stun millions...?* Beryl wondered what that could be.

"That's quite the ambition. Are you close to attaining it?" He asked her.

"Hm, not quite. But maybe." She eats the last piece of cake she had on her plate. "It's taken me years to gather all the material I have now. And I'm trying my best not to mess things up or else my entire career would've been a flop..."

"Years, huh." He mumbles. "That's some dedication. It's unheard of for anyone these days to really be dedicated to a job that of a journalist."

"Well.....I made a promise to someone from long ago." She said that with a softer tone than usual. "I promised him that his story would be told. That others' story would be told. So that's my drive."

"...I see." Beryl can sense the sincerity in her words, but it's not just that.

He could feel...a certain flame in them.

Eerily similar to the one he holds deep down himself.

"But for the time being, besides working on my own stuff, I also do the editing of my superiors. Though I don't really get any credit but....still, " She shrugs nonchalantly. "I get paid." She casually says.

"You sound carefree for a woman in her late 20's," Beryl muses.

"Hey, not all adults are depressed slobs who are pessimistic about life and the horrible reality that is taxes, okay?!"

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Their conversation went on, both individuals spending their leisure time getting to know each other at a basic level. Nothing too deep, but nothing too superfluous either. It was an equal value exchange of information, a spawn of a new acquaintanceship perhaps.



And two people in the cafe can't help but notice these two talk the time away.

" Hey...Beryl's been sitting there for a while now." Tako muttered.

*" That's my guy! Hitting up a potentially hot milf is a man's dream--"*

Tako immediately elbows Hayate's stomach at that, causing the latter to groan immediately and retract his statement.

" Urgh...but....ergh..yeah....he's been there for a while..." He says through his groaning.

" Could it really be that he's into older girls?" Tako questions, curious about it.

" Pfft, probably. But certainly not into a girl like you--"

Again, she elbows the same spot and causes him to nearly regurgitate his lunch all onto the floor.

" This will be...an interesting development." Tako grins to herself, " Finally, seems like our little Beryl has spawned a new romance~"

*" Urgh..."*

~~~~~

When she left the cafe, Yuki was by herself pondering on today's event.

Yuki never would have thought that she'd have a more pleasant than expected conversation with someone from the cafe like that. A boy that was far younger than her, and possessing quite the unique name. At first, she suspected of him having connections to a certain organization she's trying to shut down, a spy who knows her true identity could end her entire operation and at best she'd have to start from ground zero-- and at worst, she'd be given no second chance at all.

And when it came to the White Room, the latter scenario would be more likely.

Her practiced smile finally relaxes to her resting expression. She really had to sell the act that she was just some introverted character, and although she believes she put out her best effort into that character-- she could still feel the doubt rooted deep within Beryl. He was still suspecting her of something, but at the very least, she can confidently say that he wasn't her enemy. He can suspect her all he wants.

Tapping her watch-- which had a touch screen installation on -- for a status check, she made sure that the boy had no hidden electronics on him that recorded their conversation. Nor did he have any communication devices on him either. He was clean-- therefore he was safe. He had no ties to her goal, and she was glad since he seemed like a decent person to talk to suprisingly. However.....she found it strange that the boy didn't have his phone on him.

Usually, no sane teenager would leave their phone behind even for work. They'd always have it close by. A decade ago, she wouldn't have found it strange, but today's generation are so dependent on their device so it's quite unusual for any teenager to leave their phones behind like that. But it's possible that it may have been just charging but...

Ring, Ring, Ring!

Looking down on her phone to see that she's received a familiar unsaved contact's number. She doesn't take another second for her to answer.

"How is it?" She immediately asks upon answer.

"The madam agreed to an 'interview' with you, Sagami-san."

"Did she also agree to the date I set?"

"Yes, she has no problems."

"Thank you. You did good work."

Yuki ends the call and puts the phone back into her bag. Releasing a deep sigh, she finally enters her car and takes off her

shades and cap, revealing her dark blonde hair cascading down to her shoulder blades, her amethyst eyes staring at itself through the rear-view mirror with a sharp glint to them.

Just a few more things to do now....

And then I can finally...reveal our story...

...To the entire world...

With those final thoughts leaving her head, she drives off of the pavement.

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*"A hopeless project with a cast of actors who can't act."*

Beryl releases a sigh as he flipped through volume 10 of 'Sweet Today' manga. "I truly pity Arima-senpai."

"That's a first," Aqua muses as he was also comparing manga pages to the ones adapted in the episodes. "She still couldn't believe you complimented her properly."

Beryl hums as a response, not really caring of that as he felt himself being engrossed in the current arc.

Upon a more thorough comparison, Aqua quickly discovers that the script and direction were made to suit the so called 'ham' actors. Techniques were employed here to make the scenes look less bad than it actually is, and with Kana casted in to supplement half of the weight, they made it somewhat watchable to those who knows nothing of the original source at least.

*The show's crew is excellent...* Aqua notes. It really all came down to the seller's viewpoint, after all. In addition, the female lead they chose was an immensely talented actress. The average viewer wouldn't be able to tell the subtleties Kana chose to display on the screen as she tried to make her co-stars shine as much as possible.

....Thinking about it now...

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" Listen here kid. There are three types of actors.

Look at them over there.

One is the star actor. Their primary role is to attract an audience. Given they also act as poster-children, they garner solid performance fees.

Next is those with real talent. Their role is to ensure the quality of the production screen. Maintaining the program's block brand is their job.

And then lastly, you got the newcomer actors. Acting ability isn't really expected from them. They get a passing mark as long as they bring a freshness to the screen. "

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Kana was the second type in this situation.

Once again, the wise director Gotanda has proven himself as a mentor, even if it's just a previous memory.

Aqua smirks.

" There may just be a way to pull this off..." He mumbles.

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" Oh, by the way, Beryl. Almost forgot to tell you something." Aqua suddenly says.

" What is it?" Beryl says as he turns a page.

" You're coming with me to the set tomorrow." He casually says.

Beryl pauses.

And then he instantly snaps his head to Aqua with a confused look.

" Wait wha--"

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" Why am I even here..." Beryl mutters depressingly.

" That's what I wanted to ask him when he insisted he dragged

you along." Kana pouts.

Aqua was currently doing one last quick read-through of the script for the final episode. They were already at the set itself, and the production team has very limited time to be here due to the schedule issues and bad weather, though the latter suited perfectly with the supposed tone for this part of the manga.

" I hear we could only secure this place for one day. So we've gotta make it count." Kana says to Aqua, " One full rehearsal for us actors before the real filming begins."

" Right." Aqua already knows. " Though, the fact we only have one shot to actually practice everything today is quite problematic. Even my director's more thorough in the process."

Kana snorts, " I did warn you that there would be problems. But we've gotta make it work." She smiles. " It's all we can really do since we don't have much budget or time."

*" Hey there, Kana-chan."*

A familiar voice, *much to both Aqua and Beryl's chagrin*, called for their attention. A boy approached them-- the so called main star of the show. A boy with purple hair and the ' feminine ' looks.

" The rain's crazy today, huh?" He seemed annoyed. " Wish they could've postponed filming."

Kana answers, " Seems we've got a few leaks in the roof, but we'll be fine." She assures.

The male lead twirls his finger through his curled bangs, sighing in complaint. " Well, this humidity makes my hair frizzy. Plus, I hate how damp it feels in here."

Kana fakes a laugh at that before turning the attention to Aqua with a gesture of her hand. "Oh, let me introduce you to someone. He'll be playing as the stalker today."

" I'm Aqua." He politely bows, extending his hand. " I look forward to--"

" Hi." The lead cuts him off with a less than enthusiastic greeting,

before walking past him as if he didn't exist.

"...." Aqua feels irked.

He glances to Kana. " That guy's got a bad attitude. He didn't even introduce himself." He muttered to her.

Kana shakes her head with a smile. " That's the male lead--Narushima Melt."

" Well, he's young too, and it's pretty common for rising stars to act full of themselves-- err, okay now I think I'm bashing myself with that one..." Kana quickly cringes at the last part.

" Truly ironic." Beryl comments.

Kana then notices the approach of a certain man, causing her to perk up and immediately grabs both Beryl and Aqua's arms, spinning them around to lock eyes with the producer himself.

" Forget about that, and greet an important person that is approaching our way." She shoves the both of them from their backs, " Go on!"

Both brothers stumble a bit before regaining balance, and that's when they simultaneously locked eyes with the man they were looking for.

*Kaburagi Masaya....* Beryl thought coldly.

" Pleased to meet you, I am Aqua with Strawberry Productions." Aqua didn't hesitate to introduce himself politely to the set's superior. " I look forward to working with you today."

" Likewise." The man replied before turning to Beryl. " And you?"

Beryl also bows his head, the same as Aqua. " I apologize for the intrusion, sir. I am Aqua's younger twin brother, Beryl. It's a pleasure to meet you and I hope you don't mind my presence here. I'm only here in support of my older brother."

" Twins, huh?" The man muses, " Interesting. Well, good luck to you then." The introduction wasn't drawn out with any sort of follow up conversation, the man simply turned and bid his good luck before stepping off to the background.

Both Aqua and Beryl raise their heads up again to stare at the man's distancing figure.

*The man....who had some kind of connection to Ai.*

" That guy's the one in charge of the set, if you haven't noticed." Kana interrupts their thoughts, stepping in between them. " His opinions get conveyed on set via the chief director or director. He has strong ties to modeling agencies and most of the show's casting fell to him. "

" So the bad selection of ham actors were all because of that old fart?" Beryl said.

Kana immediately turns to him in a panic, trying to quiet him down. " Shush! Don't let anyone hear you say that! "

" But you were the one who came up with the term--"

" Lalalalala~ I don't know you~!" She ignores him and slowly waltz away, dragging Aqua alongside her.

Beryl sighs.

"....Seriously, besides the mission.....what in the hell am I supposed to do here..." He muttered.

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" It's rehearsal time!" It was announced.

" Let's do this." Kana glances at her co-star. " You have the script memorized?"

" Yeah." Aqua confirms. He plays a stalker who follows the female lead around.

*Quite ironic that he'd have to play a role similar to that man who killed his mother...*

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" We'll stop for now!"

" Hmm, there's a leak over here..."

" So for this shot, let's speed up the dolly then move onto the next scene."

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" Hey," Kana approaches Aqua, who was resting by the walls of the warehouse. She smiles. " For someone who says their acting was ' bad ', you still did pretty good."

" I've practiced enough that I don't hinder others during the performance. Besides that, it's still mediocre from me." Aqua insists on her, but Kana's smile told him that she didn't believe that for a second. " If you're looking for terrific acting from me, then I'm sorry."

" Well, that's a fair assessment." She leans with him. " Can't say I didn't hold any specific expectations of you..." She hummed.

" But you did enough."

"..."

She closes her eyes, resting them for a moment.

" Your acting feels like that of someone who's put in the work for a long time, and I personally like it. The little techniques you use are considerate and meticulous....it's as if I acted with a person who threw away their ego in order to blend with the story." She sighs. " Though, ordinary people wouldn't be able to tell."

" Well, only long-time actors like yourself can really notice these minor details." Aqua replies.

" Oh, please. You're not excluded from that list, you're a long time actor yourself as well." She says.

" No need to be so thoughtful." He sighs. " You're a much brighter

talent than me."

" Well that's true but--"

*Still a brat*, Aqua remarked in his thoughts.

"-- This is an important job to me, you know? I haven't gotten any lead acting roles in a long time, I've mostly been dealt with supporting character roles or cameos more like. So you'd better believe I want to give it my all and do the best I can here!" She said, completely determined.

" True, you have a point. After all, I haven't seen you in anything noteworthy for a while now. I almost thought you'd quit acting by now." He bluntly says.

" *Gah!*" His merciless words quickly formed an arrow that flew straight through her vitals.

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" Well..." Kana looked sheepish. " You're not the first to assume that. My rough patch lasted for a quite a while. I couldn't get any work, and people online treated me as if my career was over." She admitted.

" But,"

She recounts.

" I kept on training anyways."

Placing both her hands on her chest, she continues. " Even if I didn't know what I was putting all that effort in for, and even when the thought of retiring kept crossing my mind. I held onto it."

" And now..."

She turns to him.

" With this role, I'm finally getting recognized again!"

" ... "

" So I'm glad I didn't call it quits." She drops her hands to her side, and now places it behind her back as she leans closer to him. " And I'm glad to find you here in the line of acting again, Aqua."

Aqua's eyes followed her figure as she took a few steps back, still maintaining that sincere smile she had on. That cute smile, he couldn't find it in himself to deny its charm.

" Even if you say your acting isn't terrific, I'm just happy that I could work with you today..." No lies were found from her words, spinning around to face him once more and spreading her arms.

*" In this world shrouded in darkness, I learned there was someone who'd been struggling along with me!*

.....

*....That alone is enough."*

She releases a happy sigh.

Aqua stood there, taken in by the look on her face....

*Who knew....that a bratty senpai could seem pretty....*

~~~~~

Kaburagi and the director were privately conversing at the side, away from the set and the rest of the crew.

" How much longer till we resume filming?" Kaburagi nonchalantly asked as he blew out cigarette smoke, checking his wrist watch for the time.

" Melt's got a magazine shoot after this." He says before plugging back the cigarette between his lips.

" We're almost ready. In any case, Arima-san has been generous to

the staff for us." The director informs.

Kaburagi blows out the smoke again, tilting his head upwards, at the mention of Kana a small smile plays at his lips. " Ah...Kana-chan....she is an easy person to work with. Quite nice to have around."

" She does a nice job flattering just about everyone, " He says. " So she's great to appoint to whatever random role."

The director nods in agreement.

" Besides, the name ' **Arima Kana** ' is more or less known to the public. Now that she left her agency and went to freelance, her performance fee is dirty cheap and we can still leverage her name recognition." Kaburagi confidently says, " Quite the good deal. Wouldn't you agree? "

" Well....it's a pain that's picky with the acting though. This TV drama is nothing more than promotional material," He takes one last whiff before blowing out another puff. Then he steps to a nearby barrel and puts out the cigarette.

" We're not even looking for acting ability in the first place." He muttered. " It seems that's the one point she hasn't picked up on..."

.....

When the two adults left to go back on checking up with the staff on set. Beryl steps out of his hiding spot, he had picked up on everything they discussed. He concealed his presence using the darkness of the warehouse, and his already quiet persona to boot. It was frankly, an easy objective to accomplish, he takes quiet steps to the barrel where Kaburagi disposed his cigarette in.

He reaches in and quickly collects the piece, placing it into a ziplock bag and then zipping it tight. He made sure to wear gloves before hand, so as not to dirty himself and the evidence that could determine Kaburagi's relation to Ai-- and quite possibly in extension to *them*.

But besides the mission...

Overhearing how little the producer considered of Kana....

" It's a shame you're nothing but a tool to them, Senpai." His tone was laced with slight pity.

But her feelings held little priority to him in the end.

.....

" Have you collected it?"

Aqua says as he walks up behind him. Beryl turns and gives him a nod, showing the ziplock bag with Kaburagi's cigarettes neatly resting in it.

" Got it right here," He shakes the bag around.

Aqua nods, " Good. That completes our objective here."

" Mhm. And all you have to do now is to finish the filming and then we can go home." Beryl yawns. " I really need a coffee."

""

" Aqua?"

""

.....

" With this role, I'm finally getting recognized again!"

.

" Even if you say your acting isn't terrific, I'm just happy that I could work with you today..."

.

" In this world shrouded in darkness, I learned there was someone who'd been struggling along with me!

....That alone is enough."

.....

"...." Beryl evaluates the expression on Aqua's face, carefully.

His older brother seemed to be torn in deciding on something, or rather, he was contemplating on something of importance that Beryl was unaware of. But he could take a guess. It was probably about her, Arima Kana, the former genius child actor who can cry in ten seconds flat...

Beryl sighs. No matter how cold or distant Aqua can get, he's still kind to others whom he considers close. It's just a surprise for Beryl to find out that in such a short amount of time that Arima became part of that.

In that case....

" Aqua, how about you put on a show? I'll take care of the directing."

" Huh?"

....A new objective has been set

" You're easy to see through." Beryl shrugs. " You're already here. Might as well go out with a bang, right? "He crosses his arms and looks towards the set. " I'll take care of the camera work too."

Aqua looked at him as if he were crazy. But Beryl returned his gaze to Aqua with a confidence the latter had been familiar with for such a long time. Seeing that, Aqua finally makes his choice.

" But what's this about you taking care of the directing and camera work? You don't have experience in professional filming, do

you?" He asked, an amused grin playing at Aqua's lips.

Beryl's eyes seemingly radiated in the dark, as he reciprocated Aqua's grin with one of his own.

" I don't. But after knowing you my whole life, I know exactly the type of angles you'd probably be looking for." He confidently said.

Aqua chuckles. *Of course*, he thinks. That's the logic his little brother would come to.

.

.

.

Beryl extends a closed fist half-way, staring at Aqua with a ready gaze.

" Do you trust me?" He asked.

.....

" Fine." He decides,

Aqua's fist bumps against his.

" I trust you, little brother."

Both of their star pupils lit ablaze upon eye contact with the other, excitement going through the pair as they ready themselves to put out one heck of a final episode for this pitiful production.


~~~ Chapter End ~~~

Oh my god. Finally. This chapter is finished and published.

I packed in so much stuff in this chapter....it kept me up for like 3 days. I knew exactly what I wanted to accomplish in this chapter but during the last 20% of writing it, the words just refused to WORD in my head ugggghhh--

I really am sorry if the ending of this chapter seemed rush, I did the best I could. I'm not exactly satisfied since it didn't hit that spot for me fully-- but I hope it was enough to serve you guys well! Maybe if something hits, I can rewrite the last segment of this chapter but thats not my priority right now.

I have to progress the story!

And next chapter may or may not be as long as this one...(Praying that it's the latter )

I'm sure some of you may be able to guess the woman Yuki is trying to interview... ;) but who knows.

Anyway, I dont have much else to say except IM FINALLY DONE WITH THIS and i can rest peacefully for a day before getting back into writing mode.

Hope u guys look forward to the next!

See you then~

## 6. ....and with Sweet Tomorrow

" In this world shrouded in darkness, I learned there was someone who'd been struggling along with me. That alone is enough."

**- Arima Kana**

~~~~~  
" Director."

" Yes?" The director, who was casually flipping through the screenplay, turned to the script supervisor who also worked double as his assistant.

" I gave the crew the small run down of tweaks we made for the big scene. Everyone should be on page, if you want, we can resume the filming right now." He informs.

" Ah, that's good. Alright then, without further delay we can--"

" Excuse me."

The two adults were suddenly interrupted by a boy who approached them, his golden brown eyes staring at them with a distinct glow to them, his golden hair and purple tinted ends tied into a small ponytail.

" Hm?" The director didn't seem to realize who the boy was at first, until a few seconds later when a flash of recognition slowly spreads across his face. " Oh, you're Aqua's little brother, right?"

Beryl nodded.

" Ah, he told us about you when he was greeting everyone on set

with Arima-san. A pleasure to meet you. Hope you're not bored standing around here." The director smiles.

Beryl manages a small polite smile in return. " A pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Director. And don't worry, at first I was quite bored, but as time went on my boredom was replaced with curiosity."

" Really? Do tell." The older man, who was at least just a decade older in age, asked.

Beryl drops the fake pretense smile, and draws his lips to a thin line before saying,

" Mr. Director, I'm curious if this is really the best you can do?"

The director's eyes widened by the sudden shift in tone. And so did the script supervisor's. As silence dawned on them for some time, the director was the first to break out of the spell. Even if he felt unnerved by what the boy said, and in cases like these, he would've immediately dropped the conversation altogether and send Beryl off to the side without further question....

" What do you mean by that?" Yet, he still dared to ask. Ironic as it is, the boy's query spawned the director's own curiosity deep down, and some part of him had to know what the boy thought.

The tone he used for his words didn't vocalize ignorance, but understanding and sympathy.

And his eyes didn't show mockery, but heavy expectation. It was almost scary, the director thought. It's as if he stared into the eyes of his teacher from the past, the one who taught him all the know-hows in showbiz and film making.

" Everything about the episodes till' now looked and felt half-baked." He answers, " Seeing the rehearsal today was disappointing. You're clearly directing the show with a finger to point, but the actors, the script, and the transition of scenes-- they don't bring the original source material justice."

" It makes me wonder if the author of the original manga even likes this adaptation..." He stresses, waiting to see the director's shift of expression. A guilty look would be the favorable outcome here.

" Hm....well....sorry to break it to you, kid." The director remained smiling, looking unaffected by Beryl's attempt of guilt-tripping. " But the producer of this show had a different plan in mind for it. And given the budget we currently have, and the script that was approved. It's already too late to change it."

The supervisor nods in agreement.

" This entire TV show was nothing more than a means to promote our male actors." The director spoke in a low enough tone that only Beryl could pick up on. " Everything was made to fit that goal."

" And you're satisfied with that?" Beryl challenged.

" Not really, but I'm just doing my job as best I can." The director wasn't afraid to admit.

Beryl had to praise him for his calmness and straight-forwardness. He initially judged him to be weak-willed from his appearance, he wasn't very tall and he was quite chubby, although it may sound offense people who look like this are often in a very insecure position in their lives. But contrary to that, he proved to be a lot more decisive than expected. It gives the idea that rather than the producer subtly bullying him into accepting the show's production as is, he chose for it to remain like that instead. Not bothering to try.

"....I understand." Beryl sighs.

" Director, we should begin filming now. We don't have much time here, remember? Besides...the rain might..." The supervisor reminds him.

" Right." The director nods. " Like I said, go ahead and tell the crew."

" Understood." The supervisor then glances at Beryl. " Kid, if you'd kindly step to the side so you won't get in the way of filming--"

" Mr. Director, allow me to do the final shooting."

" What did you just say?" The script supervisor looked at the young teen as if he were crazy.

" Oh?" The director chuckles. " That's a bizarre request coming out of nowhere, isn't it?"

" It's not a request," Beryl clarifies heavily, " It's a challenge."

The man raises a brow. " A challenge, you say...?"

" You say you're doing the best you can with the situation you've been given. But I don't believe that one bit." His golden brown eyes narrow. " You lack passion in the work, and you're underutilizing the amount of things you've actually got. I believe I can show you that even with the odds stacked against you; mediocre actors, a bad script, and a strict schedule to boot. A good director can still salvage this."

" Especially with two actors that I know can switch the tide; Arima Kana and my brother Aqua." Beryl adds, his eyes not once breaking contact from the director's.

" That's enough."

The supervisor places a hand on Beryl's shoulder, causing the younger boy to look at him, feigning a look of surprise. The older staff member looked quite fed up with his interference, so he begins ushering him back.

Until,

" Hold on." He was stopped by the director. The supervising crew member looked back at the director with confusion, the latter wore a rather serious gaze as he eyed Beryl with consideration.

" You sound quite confident about what you're saying." He starts, " Do you have any prior experience to film making?"

" No." Beryl answers.

" No?" The director was now a bit confused, so could the boy's confidence just be a bluff?

" But if you give me control of the final scene. I'll show you what I can do."

Beryl said nothing else beyond that. But the director could somehow feel the weight in the boy's words, and once again, that look in his eyes that's so familiar to him....like his teacher's. It was almost creepy in a way, almost hypnotizing, akin to being swallowed by his endless abyss and to be twisted towards his will. The director was a fan of films that showcase the art in creation of masterpiece films. And back when was still but a mere student of the field, that was his deepest wish. To achieve creating something that can be regarded as a masterpiece by many.

But after seeing what the industry is really like, he was left with disappointment. But he doesn't blame it on anyone else but himself for possessing such an ideal imagination of what could be. To be successful in this world, you must adhere to its rules, adhere to the ones who stand on top in order to build yourself up. Eventually, he could finally begin making his own projects brimming with passion in due time. Just not now.

But seeing the look in Beryl's eyes seemingly spoke that it was possible to make something out of passion. Even with such a crappy situation at hand. *Don't fall into risk*, The director kept telling himself, but he couldn't help but lean a bit further into the curiosity of what this boy can do.

And so he...

" Sure. I've got nothing much to lose." He lied through his teeth as he shrugged. But it wasn't a complete lie neither, he was still just a low-level film creator, someone at the bottom far below the ones on the pedestal. *So what can he lose?*

" W-What?!" His supervisor turned to him, flabbergasted. " D-Director, what are you saying? Did you just agree? *Have you gone mad?* " His tone was hushed, filled with dread and confusion for whatever the director was going to say next.

" Perhaps I have." the director laughs. " I'll take full responsibility if it all goes down the drain." He said with a twinkle of amusement from his own deliriousness, for accepting such a deal.

The producer is definitely going to give him an earful for this one once he finds out...

" B-But--"

" Let's admit it, Kazuto-san. This entire drama is a mess, it's honestly embarrassing how badly we've been reviewed. The producer, Kaburagi-san, clearly cares little so long as we can market his little boy group." The director scoffed. " I've always found it annoying."

" But still...sir...we can get in trouble--"

"I'll get in trouble. Don't worry so much. Besides," The director smiles at Beryl. " I wanna see what this guy can do."

He has the eyes of someone who can possibly...create a masterpiece...
He thinks.

" Inform the crew that I'll be taking a step back, and that this boy will take charge of the reins." The short man said.

"...." The supervisor hanged his head low, releasing a deep sigh before shooting a glance to the director and then switching it to Beryl. And then he firmly decides.

" Understood, Director...." Reluctance was mixed in his tone, but deep down he held the same feelings for this production as well. They've done the best they could with what they've been given but it still isn't watchable.

In which case, if this episode were to end up a complete mess....would it really matter?

Even *he* can't forget the look on the original author's face upon discussing the direction of this live adaptation of her work. If not even the author could find joy in your interpretation of her work, then what else is there to disappoint...?

" There's something strange about the look in your eyes. Maybe that's why I'm crazy enough to give you this chance," The director says as he hands the headset to Beryl. The young boy accepts it.

" The look in my eyes?" Beryl asked.

The director shakes his head dismissively. " Don't bother asking me, even I don't know how to properly explain it. But..." He looks at him seriously. " Just know I'm putting my career on the line here."

"....Right." Beryl nods. " Thank you."

There was no need for Beryl to question why the director isn't to keen on letting him take the blame if all of this fails. As he grew into this new life over the years, he's learned that in contrast to the small world he used to live in, there are plenty of adult figures in this life that proved as positive influences. Adults who actually hold a moral compass. This director was one of them. The only thing Beryl can do to repay him for this once in a lifetime opportunity....is to do good on his word.

~~~~~

Aqua closes his eyes as he recounts a previous conversation he shared with Kana back at the cafe.

.....

*" You know, back when the old me flaunted her acting ability. I treated others like they didn't exist."*

*Her tone of voice reflected regret for how she acted. The way her hands scrambled around her lap in an almost anxious manner as she tries to gather herself once more and calm down by releasing a heavy sigh.*

*" That's why job offers eventually dried up once I was past my peak. There were kids who were better actors than me, so I had to give people a reason to cast me despite that."*

*The old her could've never admitted to that. But she's been missing out, as much as it hurts to realize that there were other people her age that could do things better than her-- it felt like a burden has been released from her shoulders. The belief that haunted her back at her peak.*

*" And look where that got me. I'm now an actor that's easy to work with, as I strive to contribute to the quality of a production without being hellbent on getting my way."*

*But now she stands confident as ever, a self-assurance for her self, a person that lets go of her insecurities and lives freely to her*



*content.*

*" I think....I understand how the director felt now. From back then..." She says before sliding the episode script to Aqua.*

*" By now, you can understand why I wanted to cast you in, right?" She smiles.*

*Before he could answer her, she sneakily grabs hold of his hands and cups it gently into hers as she locked eyes with him. He holds back a breath, taken by surprise from her action as she returned her gaze with his own.*

*" It doesn't matter who trashes me or calls me a lousy actor." Her goal was beyond that. " But..."*

*" Please.....work with me to make a good show." She asked him.*

*" I believe that...if it's you..."*

*" That it can be made possible..."*

*.....*

*To entrust me with such a thing...*

*While looking at me with those determined eyes...*

*Desperate to salvage this show....you sought me...*

*.....*

*Heh, what a despicable grown up.*

Aqua opens his eyes, analyzing the entire set. Filming had already resumed, and Kana was currently on center with her male lead partner. Acting it out, though of course the more inexperienced male lead was dishing out a mediocre performance. Aqua turns his head away and instead towards the person he's expected to see behind the main camera.

His aqua eyes locked gazes with golden brown ones. A curt nod was shared between the two, before focusing their gazes back on the objective at hand.

Aqua puts on his hood, a ghost of a smile spreading across his lips.

"Looks like it's showtime..." He whispers.

.

.

.

Many thoughts swirled through Kana's head as she makes her biggest stand for the one-run filming of this scene. She gets it, you know? How absolutely crappy this all is, the bad reviews, the horrible cuts-- all of it. Despite that, she's made it clear through her words and her actions that she was willing to do anything to make this show work. To make it watchable.

She stresses that fact to Aqua, especially.

*To herself, especially.*

For the first time in what felt like forever, she finally receives a lead role in something. This was her chance to shine again even after the career drought where only managed to secure small-part roles in shows and movies. Most of which end up under the viewer's radar, left forgotten or unknown, where it's classified as something people never talk about on the internet just because of how insignificant its production was.

But this project, this show was different. It's a live adaptation of a popular romance manga with a huge following and millions of sales. It's part of a large culture of enthusiasts who empathize and sympathize with characters that have a more artistic approach in

situations that plenty of people can relate to.

From the beginning, it's a living truth that adapting such material and transforming it into the live big screen was a tough challenge. Many attempts have been made and many have obviously failed. With few coming out with a few scraps here and there, but overall remaining a bearable watch. But with that risk, comes the viewership. With such a huge following behind the original works, it's only natural that they'd flock over to see what's up with the latest adaptation of their favorite manga.

And as much as Kana would wish the outcome would be the latter....

Unfortunately, thus far, they became the former. With 4 episodes already released and nearly all the viewers are disappointed. They're branding it a complete flop, just another failure to add to the list of previous adaptations. And yet despite that...

*It's not too late, Kana thinks.*

In the last episode comes the most iconic scene of the manga. The showdown between the protagonist and the stalker. A tear-jerking moment where the heroine realizes that in spite of the cruelty the world has afflicted on her, that there was someone out there that still loves her, and by realizing that, she sheds tears.

When Kana came across that scene in the manga, she bawled her eyes out. And as she kept re-reading through it, she still felt the emotional impact it does to people. She loves the scene so much, and that's why....she just...has to do it right...!

If she can synchronize with her co star, make him look good, and turn in a supreme performance....then surely...

*There's still...*

*There's still...!*

***NO HOPE...!!!***

*She can't make him look good. No matter how she does it, his acting just stands out in the worse way possible...!*

This scene was supposed to be scary and spine-chilling and tense! But it's not picking up that vibe at all! Kana panicked inside, her anxiety slowly adding up, will she just have to accept the lackluster final result of a scene that could've been better? Her favorite panel in the manga....ending up...like this...?

She clenches her fist, a bitter taste resting on her tongue. Does the director not care about the acting at all? Couldn't they have improved on the boys' acting, even a little bit?

*This scene...it's just...*

No. No, there's still a chance she could petition for a redo. Yes, that's it!

She turns her head, ready to stop the scene, until from the corner of her eye she noticed that something wasn't right. The director wasn't there behind the camera talking to the crew....no...it was...

" Beryl...?" She mumbled to herself, careful not to let the audio pick it up.

His eyes meets hers, before splitting off and gesturing a signal to the crew as if he was orchestrating the scene himself. But why? What is he there? Her eyes darted for the actual director and immediately spots him standing behind Beryl, seemingly observing. What's he *doing* there?

But before she could question it any further...

A loud watery step reverberated through the abandoned warehouse.

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.

.

*What is the job of a director?*

*To put simply, the job of a director is to create a vision based on the script, and thereby bringing that vision to reality using the crew. A creative leader.*

*Everything follows the director.*

*The director is often the first role credited during the credits scene of any film or show.*

*And often, when a film or show doesn't live up to what's been expected. The blame would always land on the director first.*

*Everything depends on the director.*

*" Turn down the lights a bit." Beryl says through the headset, " And cameras 4 and 5 zoom in a bit from those two angles behind the stalker."*

*A production's success depends on the ability of the director's skill in bringing out that vision. To let the audience feel and understand the artistic properties that went into the scene itself. A skilled director can easily visualize what the script is trying to bring to life, and do so effortlessly unto the big screen.*

*" The audio is picking up on his footsteps because of the puddles....Director...is this really okay?" Kazuto, the supervisor who stands near to the director, asked in worry.*

" Hm..." The director narrows his eyes, " I like it. It has a certain vibe to it..." He muttered.

Beryl's eyes were focused on Aqua as he stopped in front of the two leads.

***" This girl isn't the kind of person you think she is."***

*Your tone is dark...detestable....and creepy.* Beryl thinks before nodding to himself. *Good, that's the scene we're trying to bring out.*

Right. One could never forget.

A director can't bring out his vision alone, no, there's a major factor that must be considered when making such a statement; *The actors.*

***" She's simply not compatible with a shallow playboy like you."***

*Huh...? I thought his acting wasn't good but...* Kana felt something different from Aqua this time. It felt as if he was really bringing out the character. It felt....just like back then, all those years ago....

Actors are what bring a scene to reality, the emotions imbued in their facial expression and tone, vocalizing and expressing the message of the scene, the subtleties-- they are what people come to watch. The stars of the show, the film, the stage, all eyes will always be on the actors and how well they can bring out the director's vision.

For Beryl...

*The set is just a stage piece.*

And that...

*Actors are no different from stage puppets meant to attract the people's attention.*

*And the role of the director is synonymous with the puppeteer.*

*Pulling the strings from behind the scenes, making the puppets look nice and dandy for the audience--*

" Increase the mic. And then tune up the lights behind Aqua." Beryl commands.

And the crew follows.

Everything the director does will always turn to the actor's disposal. Utilize all of it, bring the vision to reality. Handing over the tools necessary for the actor to do his job. *Make the puppet **shine** on the stage...*

*It's all on you, Aqua.*

*I created a vision for you. The ideal scene just as you wanted.*

*Now, bring this vision to reality.*

*That's your job as an actor, isn't it?*

.

.

.

Aqua understands that he doesn't possess the talent that Ai did. He doesn't possess an aura that prances for the viewers attention on him at all times, and it's not like he's too good at being an actor either.

But he does possess an understanding of an idea. And how to bring it out.

The props, the lights, the background, the actors....

Aqua was quick to notice Beryl's way of positioning everything. Everything fit his ideal scene. All the tools were basically handed to him on a silver platter.

And now all that's left...is to leverage everything...

And possibly, just possibly...

*Replicate the charm of Ai on the screen.*

.....

Aqua made his way up close to Narushima Melt, stopping just by his ear shot.

" You know," Craning his head a little, so only Narushima can hear. " Coming up close...you're pretty ugly aren't you?"

" W...What?!"

" So that's what your face looks like without photo editing....how disappointing."

Aqua dares to show a grin as he scrutinized the slow change of expression from confusion to anger taking place on the model's face.

" Huh...?"

A turn of heel.

" What did you just say?!"

A flare of genuine rage as the model's hand shot up to grab Aqua by his hoodie's neckline.

.....



The director's eyes widened a bit upon seeing the display of genuine emotion that flowed naturally into the scene. Kana was also suprised, what happened...didn't seem too bad at all. As for Beryl, he signaled one of the cameras to adjust their view a little more in between the two actors, Aqua and Narushima.

.....  
*That's it..*

*Keep that expression you have right now!*

***" Are you deaf?! I said that girl isn't worth protecting!"***

.....

*He's improvising both his lines and positioning on set...* The director notices, but then later adds the fact that it isn't a spontaneous effort alone. His eyes trail to the boy who requested to take the final shooting himself.

*You're doing everything you can to give him the best opportunities possible, aren't you?* His thoughts asked Beryl.

" Don't cut back. Keep camera 2 on him." Beryl says through the headset. " And once the focus returns to our female lead...slowly turn up the lighting."

.....

***" This girl is a precious friend to me!"***

Narushima yelled, not realizing how natural his " acting " had come out. Kana, who stood alone, watched the scene with wide eyes as it unraveled further into the ' ideal ' look.

*This is good.... She thought in amazement. It's just like....in the manga...!*

.....

*This is a famous scene in the manga, Aqua naturally recalls. The directorial intent, composition, tempo...*

*There's meaning behind all of it.*

*I've long excelled at questions that ask me to think about the author's feelings. When I properly grasp a masterpiece, I get passing marks.*

*And it seems....*

From Aqua's peripheral, he can spot Beryl watching them intensely, ready to issue the next order if it's necessary to perfect the scene as much as possible. Aqua found it easy to work with that, it seems that his little brother shared the same understanding despite little to no experience in film directing. And yet his understanding is just as clear as his since he managed to breeze through the manga before this day came, so he knows exactly what cards to play to set the stage perfectly....

*For you, Arima Kana....*

*We've set the stage all for you....*

*You've been yearning for this chance, haven't you?*

*All that's left is for you to give it your all.*

Aqua breaks away from Narushima's grip, the latter immediately stepping back to form a shield for the girl he's protecting behind him.

***" Nothing you can do will change my mind!"***

Through gritted teeth, Narushima has begun to realize the passing events Aqua had orchestrated, but did not break the natural flow of things as he held onto Aqua's provocation and kept the genuine resentment as he spreads his arms lengthwise to protect Kana.

.....

*The lead actress's tears are the highlight of this scene...*

*To make that aspect shine brightly....*

When Beryl watched Aqua pull out the prop knife, he quickly issues the order to zoom in on Aqua's profile, to show just how disgusting he is gliding his tongue down the side of the blade as if consumed by hatred and bloodlust and...

*To bring out darkness he's trying to emulate...*

*The insanity, the spontaneous movement, the agony-- of that day.*

*The urge to truly murder.*

He watched as his brother charged towards Kana with the knife, dodging Narushima's punch, ready to slash it against Kana's face.

***" Give up and disappear from a world that doesn't need you!"***

*To appear frightening, disgusting...*

Thud! Aqua falls over to the ground as Narushima landed a genuine punch on his cheekbone. His head felt dizzy, and he would be lying if he didn't say it hurt. But at the moment, he just laughed like a psychopath who feeds off of that pain. Truly embracing the darkness of the stalker's role, not just here, but from that day too. That horrid day. Irony ran through his veins, so he's trying to laugh it away.

***" Hahaha...!"***

Slowly, he sits up, barely holding it together.

***" There's....not a single person who needs you....know that you have no place here in this world!"***

***" Get your head outta the clouds..."***

***" You have no future..."***

.....

Everyone on set watched nervously as the scene went down. Most of them, if not *all of them*, genuinely felt uncomfortable by Aqua's acting. It really did sound like he was genuinely trying to break down a girl's self-esteem, crushing it into pieces, and propelling her into a world of despair he seemed to live in.

But Beryl has his eyes focused on Kana. The one person both he and Aqua dedicated this set-up for, the one who can wrap it all together.

*With her tears alone.*

.....

***" Even so..."***

Aqua's eyes were glued to her figure, as the light brightened around her.

*The tears that slowly trickled down the sides of her cheek....*

***" Even so....there is light, yet."***

*It was beautiful...*

*She was beautiful.*

*Right....he nearly forgot...*

.....

*The genius actor that can cry in seconds flat....*

Beryl manages a small smile at her performance.

*You really are amazing at your job, Arima-senpai.*

*~~~ Chapter End ~~~*

Finally, that wraps up this bit...

This chapter was supposed to be much longer, the estimated word count supposedly matching the one from previous chapter. But I decided to save the aftermath of this for the next chapter instead.

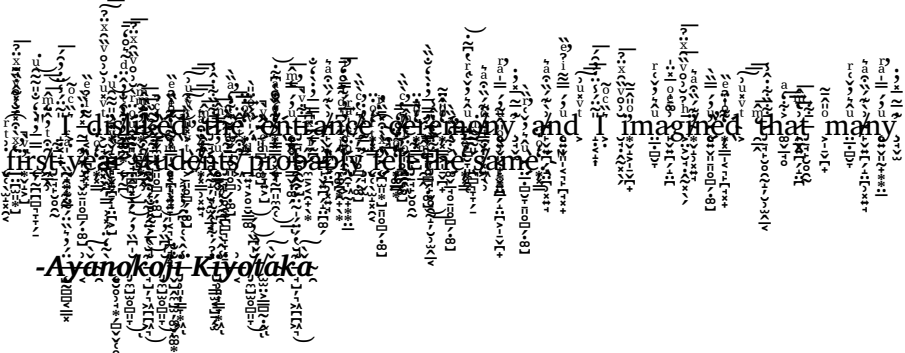
Sorry if it's delaying the plan for my original arc connecting to Beryl's past life, but I thought letting things simmer for the meantime would be easier for me to smoothen things out so I can make that transition. If that doesn't make sense then that's also my bad lmao, but hopefully you guys can understand.

Don't worry, I'll make sure your patience won't go in vain once things truly start kicking off. I'll put in my best effort, I swear. :)

Anyway, I'll see you guys soon!

And sorry for my slow update time~

# 7. The School of Her Dreams



**-Ayano Koji Kiyotaka**

**Error, Error, Error!!!---**

**■■■■ REDACTED ■■■■**

~~~~~

" I disliked the entrance ceremony and imagined that many first-year students probably felt the same."

- Hoshino Goldenberyl

~~~~~

- 
- 
- 

" My punch connected, didn't it..."

Aqua was busy rubbing a cold cloth against his cheek till' he turned around and met a suprisingly apologetic Narushima Melt.

" I'm sorry." He was sincere about it. Looks like even his arrogance could not outweigh the guilt, Narushima was a lot more perceptive than Aqua initially gave him credit for.

" No need to apologize, " Aqua dismisses it. " I got in front of your punch on purpose."

" But--"

" Surely, acting is all about leaning into your emotions." Aqua begins to point out, " Even when you realized my intentions, you still held onto that anger so you could portray a believable show of emotion."

Narushima slowly nods, albeit in shock that even Aqua noticed such a detail.

" You turned in a good performance." Aqua reassures him with a smile. " And thanks to that, Arima was able to pull off all the stops."

Narushima watched as Aqua walked away. To be honest, being complimented like that, and from someone like him felt....strange. Strangely nice, he thinks. He was never into acting and all that, really, the only reason he's starring in a drama was like this was out of recommendation from his agency that this could give him some spotlight to work out of. Otherwise? He would've been long outta here by now.

*But to be told he did a good job by a person who showed incredible acting ability....*

He couldn't help but smile to himself, his head raised high, but not so far as that he'd get lost in the clouds like he always does. Not one of arrogance. Just happiness.

.....

Kana overheard their conversation, she was standing by the side, and her eyes stuck like glue to Aqua's back as his figure approaches his brother. A surge of new feelings resonated within, the longer she looks at him.

*You did...that...for me...?*

.....

" These kids really made a mess..." The supervisor grumbles as both he and the director reviewed the captured footage. " We'll have to make a number of adjustments to our directorial plans now..."

The director releases a huff, before smiling. " Well, what else can you expect from a set filled with young actors? Reworking the script on the spot is not uncommon in situations like these."

But his thoughts linger towards that boy...

*" How did he do it..." He mumbled. " The way he filmed everything...it gives the vibe of it happening in real time. It sucks in the viewer's attention, and simulates a whole different reality....it's....a masterpiece."*

" Did you say something?" The supervisor asked.

" Kazuto-san, what do you think of the footage we got from his directing?" The director asked, expectantly.

"..." Kazuto sighs, he felt ashamed to admit it but, " It's amazing. He really brought out the story with all the orders he issued during filming, it felt as if....ya know.... you were really *there*, spectating the entire scene in real time."

" The way he monitored where each camera should go, when to zoom in or out, and the adjustments on the lighting-- it really captured the beautiful emotions exhibited from our actors. The shot with Arima Kana says it all." Kazuto says, flipping through the script with an almost melancholic look from having been proven wrong by a child.

The director chuckles. " Exactly my thoughts. It's hard to believe it's his first time..."

" You sure he hasn't done this sort of thing before?" Kazuto suspects, " Not even for a youtube video, at least?"

" Well...I did ask him and...."



.....

" Huh?" Beryl stares at him in confusion.

" C'mon, kid." The director nudges. " Surely this couldn't have been your first time directing a film, you must have a youtube channel or something, right? "

" No, I don't."

" Eh..? Cmon now! It's okay to admit it, don't act so shy--"

" No, seriously. I really don't. This is my first time shooting a scene." Beryl interrupts.

" What?" The director's smile flipped to shock as he stares at him incredulously. " But...then...how did you know to film like that? " He asked.

.....

" What did he say? " Kazuto asked, the suspense somehow killing him.

" He says he only knew how to capture that scene....because his brother, Aqua, was in it." The director seriously wanted to laugh, it was such an hysterical explanation to hear. Totally something he hadn't thought of when he witnessed such talent or skill, or whatever.

" That's ridiculous....even if they're twin siblings it's just...." Kazuto scrunched his face in disbelief. "Unbelievable..."

" He didn't tell a lie though..." The director hummed. " So it must be true."

" Well, him aside." Stretching his arms and resting it behind his head, a smile crept on his face again. " The scene will probably turn up well. And I'm sure Miss Kana is happy about it."

And the director would never admit it aloud, but *he* was happy with it too.

He witnessed something spectacular, a familiar spark was

presented to him, that spark he himself used to have back in his earlier days as someone with a more impressionable attitude towards the film industry. For a while, he truly believed he wouldn't feel it again but the boy proved him wrong in more ways than one. That a good director can truly salvage a situation like this. And bring about a masterpiece of a scene that he long wished to accomplish himself...

" Man," He mumbles, feeling a buzzing feeling in his chest. " Don't tell me I got inspired by some kid..." Despite his tone, his smile was bright as day.

*Hoshino Goldenberyl....that's your name, wasn't it?*

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*" Kana-chan, shall we film the final scene?"*

~~~~~

" Can we go home now?" Beryl yawns, complaining like a child. That caused a chuckle to leave Aqua's lips and had him shaking his head at him.

" You did good." Aqua ignores Beryl's tired tone, and shoots a compliment instead.

Beryl shakes his hand dismissively. " Nah, you did good." He shoots back.

Aqua releases a huff.

" We both did good, then." He states with a tone of clarity, extending a closed fist to him.

Beryl bumps his own fist against Aqua's, this time with the little brother on the receiving end of this sibling contract. The job was done, and the both of them can take that with pride. However...

" Scene 7, shot 310."

" And....action!"

" She did better though." Beryl remarks, switching his gaze from Aqua onto Kana.

" Mm," Aqua hums, following Beryl's gaze, having his land on Kana as well. " Can't disagree..."

After all, with all the preparations and improvisations made from the two brothers....

They were all meant to let Arima Kana shine the most.

~~~~~

*" Sniff...! sob....ajsdrudn...!"*

Not so discreet crying filled the silence of the room as the episode rolls into credits. The Hoshino siblings and Miyaemon, were all seated on the couch and had watched the premiere of the final episode for the mostly half-baked production TV Drama that is " Sweet Today ", but contrary to many expectations-- the final episode evoked plenty of emotions from people who were still on the boat to watch it.

*" \*Wheezzee...!\* "*

And Ruby was bawling her eyes out.

" Are you done yet?" Aqua boredly asked as he passed another roll of tissue to Ruby's direction. The latter quickly snatching it and ripping a piece out to blow her nose and her tears again.

" Ruby....stop crying. It's just a show." Miyako says.

" Miyako-san, you're tearing up too, you know?" Beryl blandly points out.

" Tsk, I'm not." Miyako stubbornly denies, snatching a piece of toilet paper from Ruby and quickly wiping away the few stray tears that rolled down her cheek. " It's just...something got in my eye." She excuses.

*" Waagh...it had no reason....to be so sad...even in this crappy adaptation...!"* Ruby cried out.

" Ahem," After regaining composure of herself, the older woman begins to realize something. " It's quite strange though.... if you compare this episode to the ones that released before. It's like night and day. Tonight's episode felt like it received a shift in production..."

Aqua and Beryl glance at each other, and then immediately avert. Neither brother willing to elaborate on that.

" And big brother says his acting wasn't all that good..." Ruby, after wiping away the last bit of tears she had left, turned to Aqua with a smirk. " But look at you, portraying the role so well. It sent shivers down my spine, you know!"

" Don't get so smug." Aqua sighs, " This will be the only and last time you'll ever see me on the screen again."

" Ehhh~" Ruby still kept that smug tone of hers, she didn't believe that for a second.

But then she switches her attention to Beryl, with a rather curious expression replacing her previous smug one. She never found the right time to ask this, but it's been bugging her from time to time. and there's probably no better time than now.

" Say, why did you Aqua bring you on set? Were you really just there for emotional support?" Ruby asked.

" You think I'd be there for anything else?"

" Well....maybe? I don't know, I feel like you helped out with the filming or something, knowing you." She says.

" Think again, because that's just ridiculous--"

" Huh? Wait, Beryl is that...." Miyako trails off, pointing her index at the screen, gaining the attention of the triplets so that they looked at the screen too.

Beryl's eyes widened.

~~~~~

Special Assistant Director - Hoshino Goldenberyl

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" .... "

" .... "

" .... "

" .... "

Ruby and Miyako slowly turn to Beryl with blank expressions.

" Well, won't you look at the time?" Beryl says, standing up and looking at his watchless wrist, faking a yawn. " It's so late! I'm heading off to bed now." He begins to walk away.

" Good night family--"

" Where do you think you're going!" Ruby comes to tackle Beryl from behind.

" Owmph!" Beryl falls flat on his stomach with a loud thud against the wooden floor. Ruby immediately flips over so that he was facing her and she begins shaking him back and forth as if she intended to turn his brain into gooey mush--

" That was your camera skills the entire time?!" She asked, still shaking him.

" Stop--" Shake

" I'm--" Shake

" Getting--" Shake

" Dizzy--!" Shake again.

Okay, this is getting out of hand... Having had quite enough of Ruby's unnecessary shaking, Beryl waits a few seconds, before spotting and then seizing the opportunity to switch the tides to his favor.

" Eh--?" In an instant, Ruby found herself on the ground, caught in an arm bar locked tightly by Beryl's legs.

" G-Gak--!" She immediately taps out.

But Beryl refused to release her.

" L-Let go-- you're going to--grkk! k-kwill me!" She struggled to say, her tapping quickly learned to slapping his legs the hardest she could. It felt like her arm could snap at any moment, dammit!

Miyako and Aqua sighs from the background. Ruby truly has to have the biggest balls in Japan to even think of messing with Beryl despite knowing she'd lose like this one way or the other. Well, I guess that goes without saying that the line between courage and stupidity is closer than one might actually think. And judging from how the girl was being assaulted by her little sibling's ruthlessness--she was currently on the latter end of that spectrum.

" Kill you? No, you see, this won't kill you." Beryl twists his hips, slightly extending the pain. " *You're just going to lose an arm.*" He heartlessly whispers.

" W-Wahh--! Aqua! Miyaemon! Hellpppp!!!!" Ruby panicked, she hasn't even set foot on the stage to begin her idol career and now she's going to lose an arm?! She can't let this happen!

" Okay, there will be no arm breaking here when I'm around." Miyako interrupts, standing above them with a serious look on her face. " Beryl, let her go." She commanded.

" Alright, alright...." Beryl promptly releases his hold on her, " I wasn't going to actually do it." He nonchalantly says.

Ruby immediately points her finger accusingly at him. " What do you mean? You really were going to break my arm there!"

" Now why would I do that? I'm your biggest supporter, you know?" He questions her as if *she* were the crazy one.

" Stop trying to gaslight me!" Ruby tackles him again and the two begin roughhousing again....

Miyako stares blankly, a fire slowly igniting in her eyes as she releases a steamy sigh.

" Alright then, if you two are going to keep fighting..."

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" You can't be serious--" , " Huh?! I don't deserve this!"

" Zip it. I'll hear none of it." Miyako strictly said.

As punishment for Beryl and Ruby being a little rowdier than usual and testing Miyako's patience. She had both the kids standing in the hallway, arms outstretched, and an equal amount of three books stacked at each of their palms for them to balance.

" Keep those arms straight." Miyako gives a pointed glance to Ruby. " Or else you get hit with this stick." She says, patting a discipline stick on her hands to show that the older woman was dead serious this time.

" B-But my arms hurt!" Ruby begs for mercy, to which Miyako responds with none.

" I know it does, but you know, idols actually use this method for muscular endurance and to practice balance. So think of it as training but still a punishment, alright, Ruby?" Miyako smiles.

" I-is that really true...?" Ruby mumbles before turning her head to Aqua, who was seated on the chair, watching them in amusement. " Aqua--!"

" Don't drag me into it." The older brother immediately rejects all requests of assistance. " I'm not helping you, and besides, Miyako-san isn't wrong either. It can help as idol practice."

Ruby frowns before sighing in defeat.

" Brother, help...." Beryl tries to play the ' irresistible little brother ' act that was theoretically proven to guilt trip any older sibling if done right--

" Nope." Aqua remained unaffected, leaving Beryl with a bitter taste of disappointment.

*I did it right, the theory was just wrong...* He thinks in denial.

" How long do we have to stay like this..." Ruby whines.

" 30 minutes." Miyako says, tapping her index on her crossed arms. " But I won't be here to make sure of that since work just called me to the office for important business."

" Huh? But it's so late...?" Both Ruby and Beryl acted like they cared but really...

*As soon as she steps out that door, I'm dropping this book!* Was the similar process their thinking led to.

Miyako sighs, " Yes, but it's important. That's why...." She places her hands on Aqua's shoulders. " I'm leaving your brother in charge to make sure that you two didn't move an inch for those 30 minutes."



" I can count on you, right, Aqua?" She asked.

" Don't worry. I'll make sure this time that they'll serve what's due." Aqua assures. Satisfied with his answer, Miyako hands over the stick of discipline to him.

" In that case, you'll need this. I'll leave it in your capable hands." She waits a while before Aqua finally accepts it. Nodding, she gives one last warning look at Beryl and Ruby before quickly changing and then leaving the house.

Golden brown and Ruby eyes stare at Aquatic ones as a moment of silence befalls the room....

That is, until Ruby releases a confident sigh. " Finally, she's gone!" her arms slowly loosening up.

But as soon as Beryl was going to do the same, he quickly noticed the sharp look in Aqua's eyes, so he stills again while Ruby slowly lowers her palms.

" Well, Aqua, looks like there's no need to--"

***Thwack!***

" *Ow! What the--?!"*

" Straighten those arms."

***Thwack!***

" Ah--! Hey!" After getting smacked twice by her sides, she straightens her arms again, back to her previous position of balancing the books.

" Just because she left me in charge doesn't mean you're off the hook." Aqua rolls his eyes, " You two had this coming for a while, anyway. It's best you learn the importance of minimizing scuffles between yourselves."

" Even when she starts most of them?" Beryl inputs.

" Well you certainly know how to end them!" Ruby seethes at him, reminding him of the countless times she found herself in a submission hold whenever he flipped the tables on her.

" Thank you." Beryl takes it.

" That's not a compliment!" She growls.

" It doesn't matter who starts or ends it. What matters is the two individuals who are usually in it." Aqua interjects. " Deal with your 30 minutes, preferably in silence."

" But my arm..." Ruby whines.

"..."

Aqua looks between them in silence before sighing to himself. They had a strange dynamic, yet one could argue that they're inseparable, even when they fight other and exchange bitter insults, they've got each other's backs just as much. But as an older brother who occasionally has to walk around town with these two brats under the eye of public scrutiny, he can somewhat understand Miyako's worries into taming these two wild animals. He can't count the amount of times he felt ashamed and apologetic to strangers for the two's disruption in the background.

.....

After a deciding 5 minutes or so, without a peep from neither Beryl nor Ruby. Aqua suddenly gets up.

" I'm going to get myself a treat from the convenience store. Be right back."

" Huh?" Both younger siblings look at the older with hopeful eyes.

" When I come back I'd better see the two of you still balancing those books." He eyes them carefully, " Don't try to act slick and place it down only to place it back as soon as I enter the room again. I can catch the two of you lying, easily."

"..." Immediately, that hopeful gaze was decimated. It wasn't a bluff, Aqua can easily see through easy lies such as this, I mean how

could he not? He's had these two by his side for practically his entire life now. And they knew it too.

" But...."

*But...?* Beryl and Ruby wore quizzical expressions.

" If you really do want to get out of this punishment. Then....I'll only let one person between the two of you to do so." Aqua holds up a finger. " The two of you will have to discuss this with the other, because one person will have to hold both of your weights and endure the 30 minutes while the other is free to go."

" R-Really?!" Ruby perks up, immediately glancing at Beryl, but upon meeting his gaze of rejection she immediately silences.

" Not happening." He blankly tells her.

" Tch!"

But Aqua clears his throat, returning their attention to him. It seems he had more to say.

" However, even if you do agree on something. There's still an extra catch to it." Aqua continues, " When I come back, I'll ask the person holding both of your book stacks this question; *Did you agree to do this or did they force you to.*"

" If the person holding the stacks answers the latter, then the ' free ' person will undergo punishment." Aqua said.

" Huh?" Ruby scrunches her eyebrows at this as sweat pooled on her face, " B-But that would mean that one of us could betray the other at any time! And god knows Beryl would betray me in a heartbeat!"

" Heh." Beryl chuckles, proving her point.

" Well then," Aqua grins. " I suppose the two of you could take this as a practice of trust. And developing your relationship with the other to be less violent and more ' wholesome '. Either you try to discuss about trust, or you both endure these 30 minutes." He shrugs, " In the end, it's all up to you two."

" Good luck. I'll be back soon."

~~~~~

While the average person accustomed to Ruby and Beryl would quickly assume that their verbal assault against the other would clash as soon as Aqua left the room, suprisingly enough, silence was what rested in the hallway. It felt almost eerie, things may be quiet, but it was far from anything calm. There was hidden tension dense enough to cut with a knife between them.

Beryl was used to being a silent person. It was part of his whole shtick, and it remained prevalent throughout his elementary and middle school years too, so being silent was normal behaviour for someone of his history.

However....

He glances at his quiet sister. *He couldn't exactly say the same for her.*

Ruby is not a quiet person by nature, in fact, staying quiet actively goes against her nature. The nature of an extroverted person such as herself, to freely express whatever she's feeling at the moment, a longing itch to do something instead of doing nothing, and a depressing attitude when she doesn't get to do the things she wants to do. It's not that she's incapable of maintaining silence, she simply does it when needed to.....but when it's not needed to, she goes off.

From the point of view of someone who understands her character, the typical actions Ruby would resort to in a situation like this would be to yell his ear off till' he becomes clinically deaf. But so far, she hasn't once said a word, nor looked in his way. But judging by the twitching of her eyes, and the biting of her lip, she was clearly containing something raw inside and refusing to let it go out. In other words, for whatever reason, this silence was definitely killing her.

So he provides her an opening.

" You're not going to bargain with me for your freedom?"

Her shoulders shook in surprise, glancing at him with distrustful eyes before promptly averting them with a loud huff.

" You're either going to reject me immediately, or lead me on with betrayal. I lose either way." She muttered.

" You don't know that." He eggs her on, " It's within natural order that any man or woman can be persuaded with something, so long as the proposal appeals to them."

" If you can convince me, then surely, I might just--"

" Nope. Nah-dah. Not hearing you right now. Bloop. Not a sound. Brtffffllppp." She childishly blows through her lips, mocking him.

Beryl sighs.

.....

" You do realize we're here because of you, right? You can't deny it." He said.

"....." Ruby stays silent.

Beryl's gaze went from her face to her arm, it was currently shaking, looking like it's barely able to hold up.

"....Does it really hurt?" He asked in a suprisingly gentle tone.

" Would you care?" Ruby grumbled.

" Of course I would," He answers. " If it really does hurt then just hand over your stack to me. I'll hold it for the both of us--"

" Nope, you're going to trick me." She says, immediately shaking her head before eyeing him with suspicion. " Don't think I'll fall prey to your mind games, I know you just as much as you know me!"

Before he could counter her statement, she brazenly continues.

" I've developed a pseudo-spidey sense that alarms me whenever you're going to pull something nasty on me." She narrowed her eyes, seemingly smug with herself. " You can't fool me, Beryl~"

" No need to. You're pretty much already fooling yourself," Beryl rolls his eyes. " Don't be stubborn. Just hand it to me." He insists.

" No!" She refuses, " I don't trust you, and besides Miyako-san says this is endurance training. So it's beneficial to me anyway."

Or so she says, but her arm continued to seemingly twitch in pain. Beryl couldn't take his eyes off it, it was bound to shut down completely in a little while and doing this was just going to stall its recovery and have it unnecessarily ache even more. *Perhaps deep down he did feel just a tiny bit of remorse for being the cause of that pain...*

.....

A turn of heel and approaching footsteps snaps the reverie.

" Wha-- Beryl, what are you--?"

Confusion sprayed across her face as he stepped back into place without another word.

.....

There he stood, back to posture, with equal stacks of books resting on his palms as he spreads his arms horizontal, but the stacks on his palms seemingly increased with an extra 3 added to each.

"...."

And none on Ruby.

" Why did you..." Slowly her arms droop down to her sides as she stares at him. His eyes were closed, as if he were trying to concentrate himself solely on endurance.

" Your arm hurts because of me, right?" He spoke, " Take a seat and rest. You're only going to render your arms immobile if you strain them so much when it's clearly aching."

She steps in front of him with her hands on her hips as she cranes

her head upwards to meet his eyes, snapping her fingers in front of him in order to 'wake him up'. The bone-grinding sound quickly snapped his eyes open to gaze down at her, confused.

Don't tell me she really thinks I'd still betray her...

"Just so you know, I won't betray you. I mean it this time." He assures her, but she was not deterred.

"What about you?" She asked, her brows furrow in worry. Her glances directed at the stacks of books on his palms.

Huh, so it's not about that?

"This is nothing." He's been through plenty worse, after all.

"Still it's..." She looked guilty now. Beryl couldn't understand why. The Ruby he knows is kind, for sure, but when it's at his expense a silly little thing like this would get her jumping in happiness like a spoiled little girl.

"What's wrong?" He decides to ask her.

But not without a quip into the mix. "I find it odd to find you so distraught when I'm the one shouldering the weight here, especially when you caused the mess in the first place--"

"I was mad, okay?"

Beryl stopped mid-sentence, Ruby looked impatient and a little nervous after admitting that.

"...What were you mad about? If it's the directing, then I'm sorry for not telling you. But it was just a spontaneous act, it wasn't originally my plan to--"

"That's...." She sighs. "That's not...what I mean."

"Whenever there's a chance to praise you....you always redirect it to something else." She starts, "This was something I took notice since elementary all the way till now. Every time you do something amazing, or whenever you try to help someone, you always pin the source to either me or Aqua."

" I don't like getting too much attention. I thought you already knew that, Ruby."

" Of course I know that, but that's not the root of the issue here!" She points at him. " You never allow anyone to praise you!"

"...."

Beryl, with all his brain power he could muster, tried to understand where Ruby was trying to go with this. The ' root of the issue '? He sees no root, and he fails to register this as a serious issue besides framing his actions to either of his siblings, but she made it clear that that's not the reason why she's so agitated.

Sensing that Beryl wasn't getting it, Ruby decides to make it clear.

" Beryl, I want to be proud of you." She said, sincerely. " But you never allow me to."

" Like just a while ago, when you denied having any involvement with tonight's latest episode. But then the credits show that you *did* do the directing, you tried to run away." She frowns. " You keep trying to avoid being praise like it was some virus. Whenever there's a reason to be proud of you, you always somehow snap those reasons away with a comment or two."

" It's necessary so that I don't attract more attention from other people. You have to understand--"

" There's nothing wrong with that. But don't you think it's alright if you admit to it when you're at home?"

"...."

" I get that you don't want attention, I really do. And it's your business but..." She clenches her fists. " Whenever you speak about helping me out with my dreams, or giving me advice, or talking about how you're my number one supporter. It makes me feel guilty knowing that I've....never done the same for you."

" It makes me doubt a few things....what if you're just saying all this because of our promise? It makes me think that the promise we made is holding you back, like....what if the reason you don't find it

in yourself to look for dreams is because mine is just easier for you to get to? "

She looks down, nipping on her lip as the thoughts raced further. " I'm afraid...of being the person holding you back....I....I want you to be happy too....to find *your* own dream to follow...to do the things *you're* good at, freely, and receive praise for it..."

" If I really am holding you back then--"

" You're not."

"....." She smiles, pitifully. " You're just saying that to make me feel better."

" I'm not." His tone was soft. " So get those thoughts out of your head."

" But--!" When she looked up at him, she lost the words to continue. His eyes were focused on her, with an intensity that instantly threw away everything else she was going to say. He always had this look of certainty, a confidence she sometimes wish she had for herself, it assured everyone he came across with this look in his eyes, her included.

" Ruby, it is true that I don't possess dreams like you do. But that's not the result from our promise, it's something....I have a problem in myself." He can't tell her the mission. " So for the time being, share your dream with me. Allow me to support you as much as I can, and make that my dream."

" Remember? I told you, if I don't have dreams for myself by the time we get older, that I'd be your secretary." Beryl thinks back on it himself, before managing a small smile. " Right....and I remember saying that it didn't sound too bad of an idea."

" But still....are you really sure?" She was worried.

Beryl doesn't like it when she gets worried.

He'll do anything to quell her worries away.

Even if it means reinforcing his promise with her again.

" It's a promise, remember?" He said to her.

She sighs, a lot calmer now. Looks like his reassurance was successful, but she still wore that downcast expressions. Seems like he was yet to address the issue she had with all of this in the first place, better now than never, he guesses.

" As for the praise thing....well, I wasn't entirely honest."

" Huh? "

Whenever he was praised, he was only reminded of the past. The words he hears every day coming out from the instructor's mouth, or from that man. Words that never really held meaning, so he always disregarded it as nothing but useless white noise.

And it carried over to this life too....except...

Something had changed. A certain person praised him, and it was genuine, it held meaning. For the first time ever, he felt *something* when he made her proud.

I guess...I subconsciously restricted that to you alone, huh, mom? He thinks.

" I never really cared much for praise in the first place, when it wasn't about receiving attention. It was just about me avoiding a meaningless concept, I find it empty receiving most praises, so I always redirect it to somewhere else. I know I can just accept it, but then they create expectations out of me. Something I don't really like either. Do you get me?"

It was his truth, the truth derived from his past experiences from the white room.

" Ah..." Ruby slowly nods in understanding, her eyes lighting up again after receiving an honest answer out of him.

" But that doesn't mean I can't praise you, right?" She asked. " Beryl, it's only fair that you let me become your number one supporter too, you know?" She pouts.

He eyed her expression, and he sensed determination from her gaze. She wasn't going to drop this anytime soon, really, he saw no point in agreeing to something like this nor does he see much point in her having to praise him. After all, the truth was that she was going to grow above him, shine more than he could. That was the plan, wasn't it?

But she's just.....unbearably honest.

Fine....if it makes her happy then...

"....." He sighs.

His eyes began to look at anywhere besides her, his tone shifting in a way Ruby would never expect.

" If...that's what you want....then....you can."

She gasped.

" Wait...Beryl, don't tell me...."

""

" Ah~ I see~"

A smug smile begins to decorate her face. She places a palm against her cheek as she looked at him, teasingly.

" You were just too shy to receive praises from your sister this entire time!"

" You're delusional."

" I can't believe it--!"

" No, seriously you shouldn't."

" --All this time, my baby brother was really just too shy to accept praises from his beautiful older sister, fufu~!"

" Ruby, I swear to--"

" Hahaha! Admit it, Beryl!" She points at him, confidently, the joyful youth she typically possessed finally returning to her. A far cry from the Ruby of five minutes ago. " You were shy this entire time, weren't you?!"

" You make it hard for me to fight against to urge to just throw you out of the window."

" Haha, he's shy~ Uuu, my shy little brother~ Shy~ Shy~ Shy~" After plunging the knife of shame deep into his skin, she twists the blade by constantly poking his sides with each repeat of the word ' Shy '.

Beryl seriously wanted to put her in her place.

But deep down, he was content with this.

He found this look of happiness better suited for her than that sad expression from before.

" Hehehe~ So Shy~~~"

"...."

But still, oh how he wishes to drop these books on her and squash her like a bug--

" I'm back."

Aqua walks into the room with a plastic bag full of snacks. His gaze immediately switches from Ruby and Beryl, and his lips remained a thin line as an aura radiated off of him.

Ah.... An idea lights up in Beryl's head.

Ruby's teasing expression immediately morphs into one of horror, Aqua's presence, and Beryl's lit up eyes told her everything she needed to know.

She became the free one.

" So, it's Beryl carrying the weight, huh..." Aqua sends a pointed glance to Ruby, to which she nervously gulped at his stare, before approaching his little brother.

" So....did she force you, or did she not." His eyes were cold as he stared Beryl down, ready to pass judgement depending on Beryl's choice of response. The little brother smirks.

I shouldn't have trusted you, dammit! Why did I let him do that! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid--! Ruby was pulling her hair when she sensed the evil aura coming from Beryl. She shouldn't have let the devil sweep her off her feet like that! She was a fool!

" Well..."

I'm going to die, oh god I'm going to die--!

" She--"

I hate you so much Beryl, I'm going to haunt you after my death you cheating scum!

" Didn't."

I'll make sure you never have a peaceful night's rest you undeserving little brat hell spawn of a brother-- wait, what?

" Eh...?"

" Really?" Aqua narrows his eyes in scrutiny.

" Mhm, I took it on myself. After all, her arm was hurting and that fault goes to me." Beryl answered.

" Is that right..." Aqua hummed suspiciously before turning to Ruby. " Looks like you're safe."

" Phew..." Ruby sighs in relief.

" Well, 30 minutes have already passed. You can put down the books now." Aqua said to Beryl.

" Oh? I see." Beryl drops them on the table immediately.

" I bought snacks for the three of us, so just get some." Aqua gestures to the bag.

" Ooo! Potato chips!" Ruby immediately snatches.

" I see." Beryl nods before walking to the bag.....or...not?

" I'll take the snacks, but after...." His glare locks onto Ruby. "***I take out the trash.***"

Ruby had already stuffed her mouth full of chips, she felt a chill run up her spine as Beryl approaches her menacingly, with her cheeks expanded like a chipmunk she began to make noises in panic.

" W-Wait--?!"

Beryl picks her up over his shoulder and begins approaching the window.

" *Waiiiitttt!!!!!!!!!!*" She begged, immediately regretting teasing him earlier, but Beryl's will wasn't swayed by her newfound sense of remorse.

.....

Aqua facepalms.

" Guess they didn't learn a thing..." He sighs.

~~~~~

With the acting gig all over and done with, Beryl had no other choice besides going to work. Tamako greeted him at the door, all excited, and even attempted kissing his cheek to show him how much she's missed her little cafe mascot-- but Beryl didn't hesitate to push her face out of the way, much to her disappointment. Tako and Hayate greeted him too, but Beryl could sense the malicious intentions they have for him which was telling enough that they

probably knew about his involvement with the show, somehow.

But other than that?

He was ordered to clean the tables as a start.

.....

" Well, well, well...."

A face gets in the way of Beryl's cleaning.

" If it isn't the ' special assistant director ', Hoshino Beryl..." A face that belonged to Hayate's.

"..."

Beryl sprays water on it and immediately wipes it with a rag.

" Argh! What the hell?!" Hayate flew back, immediately caressing his face and searching for a clean towel to wipe it off.

" Sorry, your face seemed dirty with all that acne building up. Though it'd help." Beryl shrugs.

*" Ha ha ha. Very funny, you dipshi--"*

" Anyway!" Tako shoves Hayate to the side and begins batting her lashes in Beryl's direction. " Did you really do the filming for that episode?"

" I didn't know you watched cheesy stuff like that, Tako-senpai." Beryl tries to change the topic.

" I would never watch that crap, but that episode was trending on tiktok. See?" Pulling out her phone and proving her words to be true, as multiple videos were made depicting everyone's delighted reaction to the final episode of Sweet Today.

Beryl looks at the mini-screen and notices that it indeed was trending. With over 125k views, 67.1k likes, and 5k comments. He was suprised this many people found the scene that amazing. Curious as to why, he presses the comment section and reads a little bit of what everyone is thinking.

~~~~~

Anonymous:

- It can't just be me who thinks that the stalker is lowkey kinda cute right? 🙄🙄

(View more replies [30])

~~~~~

Wow....*what a great start*, Beryl cringes for his brother before scrolling down to see more ' acceptable ' reviews.

~~~~~

Anonymous:

- To think they pulled out this type of acting for the final episode.... it got me speechless ngl.

(View more replies [10])

Anonymous:

- I was a bit disappointed about how Arima portrayed the female lead during the other episodes, but she really nailed it this final episode!

(View more replies [15])

Anonymous:

- My bones were shook when I saw the male lead actually ' acting ' for once, it felt like it came straight from the panel! Great episode! (But the series as a whole is.....mid)

(View more replies [7])

~~~~~

They were definitely positive, but there are a few bad comments scattered here and there. And most of them are collectively agreeing that the final episode was definitely a higher level of production they never would've expected from this mediocre adaptation, still though, it doesn't save the previous impressions they have of the adaptation series as a whole. Ranking it as bottom-tier.

Beryl was just about to hand the phone back to Tako, until he spotted a peculiar comment amongst the rest, one that had just



appeared.

~~~~~

~Frill_ShiraNu1~

- The camera work is outstanding. My best regards to the one responsible. [♥. 250k....]
(View more replies (1.5k))

~~~~~

" E-Eh? No way!" Tako stared at the comment with wide eyes. " S-Shiranui Frill just commented!"

" Who?" Both Hayate and Beryl asked. The both of them clueless as to who that is.

Hayate was not well-versed in film or TV media since he was always touching grass or spends the rest of his free time grinding on his favorite game.

Beryl knew what was necessary about the entertainment industry, little tips and tricks that could help Ruby skyrocket through the charts once she finally has an official group. But special persons like celebrities or other popular stars were superfluous information to him, thus he disregards their existence completely until brought up. Usually by Ruby. And some tidbits are supplied to him thanks to Aqua's knowledge as well. Overall though, he doesn't hold much interest in that sort of field.

" Shiranui Frill, the multi-talented performer that can sing, dance, and act! Everyone knows her, so how can you two be so dense?!"

" Aw c'mon, Tako Bell. You already know I'm not big on that type of stuff," Hayate releases a bored sigh.

" Never heard of her." Beryl says in an honest tone.

" My gods, you two live under a rock, I swear..." Tako sighs, exasperatedly. She puts away her phone and opts for a change of topic, lest this gets any more deserted.

" Anyways, that dead topic aside..." Tako smirks. " Who knew you could film with such skill, Beryl~"

" I only did what Aqua told me to do." Beryl doesn't even look at her, continuing to wipe the table. " He convinced the director to let his little brother do the shooting for that scene, and he agreed."

" Well, the show was already crappy enough from the reviews....can't blame the guy for choosing to be experimental with the last one..." Hayate comments.

" Hey!" She slams her hand on the table, catching Beryl's attention. " Don't try to hide behind big brother now, I can tell that you're using him as an excuse."

" You're actually a lot more skilled than one would've thought, Beryl!"

"...."

" And with such skill, maybe you could use that as leverage to hook up with Mrs. Mysterious who enters the cafe~" Tako winks suggestively, giving his arm a little nudge nudge.

" Mrs. who?" Beryl looks at her as if she were an asylum patient.

" She's talking about that milf you've been trying to rizz up lately." Hayate blatantly puts it.

*Milf? What in the world is a milf?* Beryl thinks, confused by these terms. He tries to recall every single term he encountered on the internet, but he hasn't seem to have stumbled upon anything milf-related. He quickly deduces that it must be one of those ' degenerate ' things that his peers back in middle school discussed about.

And when they used the word ' milf ', it was typically used to describe...

*An older woman...?*

" Are you referring to Tamako-san as a Milf?" Beryl questioned.

" Huh? Wait what, no! Of course not! You're not getting it--!"

*" That's quite the derogatory term to refer your boss as, Hayate-kun~"*

" Eeghk--!"

Hayate immediately freezes, his pupils disappearing, as his soul slowly leaves his body.

Tako laughs in amusement.

While Beryl stares at him in confusion.

*Was I wrong?* He asked himself.

~~~~~

" You're back."

It was later in the afternoon, a typical event would happen at this time. A certain interaction that Beryl somehow finds himself intrigued with. He was met with shades once more, an accompanying smile that graced what little features she allowed to show as she took a piece of her blueberry cheesecake.

" I saw the episode, by the way." She started.

" I didn't take you as someone who would be into dramas." Beryl responds, and she laughs.

" Well, no, I'm really not into them-- butt, you see, one of the co-workers I'm close with is really into them. She would constantly force me to watch Sweet Today with her, just so she could rant about how dogshit it is and then make comparisons with her top 5." Yuki sighed, tiringly. " Honestly, she can be a handful with it."

" She sounds like trouble." Beryl muses, " For someone that possesses social anxiety, she sounds like hell too."

" Oh, definitely." Yuki nods her head. " But overtime, she and I got closer. And besides, as an adult, you've gotta be involved in companionship one way or another. Humans work best together, instead of alone."

" I agree with that."

Engaging in conversation with her feels like a tug of war, she's rapidly draining each of my attacks, and remaining passive about it. Beryl thinks. She's been on his mind from time to time since the last they'd interacted. Like a ghost riding on his shoulder.

Each lie she spills from her mouth is well-perfectly timed, and woven into her story. Any person would be fooled and believe her words to be the truth, but not Beryl. He's certain that she is no harm to his family, but then that doesn't leave him with any answers, the question is still there. It just becomes more complicated then, why does her presence attract him? Why does it evoke suspicion from him. Until that question has been answered, he plans to know more about her. But he has to give where credit is due, and admit that she employs a well-performed act to conceal whatever info that could give him leeway about her.

And deep down, he can't help but muse...

That having a conversation with her felt oddly stimulating to his senses...

Like old friends, who've finally reunited. But that would be a ridiculous thought to have, no?

" I noticed your name was credited at the ending, and it made me curious, so I decided to watch the last episodes a lot more carefully and came to a conclusion; would you hear me out?" She said, clasping her hands.

" Go ahead." He says.

" At first, I attributed the finale's suprisingly well-produced act to your brother's and the actress, Arima-san. But then upon delving deeper into it, I realized.... that it wasn't their contributions alone that made the episode shine the way it did." She takes another piece of cheesecake into her mouth. " But a closer look at how the scene was filmed was the key into making it better than it is."

" With skills like that, you can refine it further by going to a school like..." She hums in thinking motion before the idea hits her.

" Like Yoto high!"

" I already applied to that school, actually."

" Really? Did you get accepted?"

" Well, the email should arrive within a few days....but I'm quite confident I will." Beryl shrugs.

Yuki smiles. " It'd be a shame if you weren't accepted, you could learn a great deal from the performing arts department there--"

" I'm taking general education." He clarifies.

" What? Why?" Yuki tilts her head, confused at his choice.

" Not really interested in anything related to performing arts." Beryl sighs, " I only did the filming because my brother believed I could match what he envisioned, and I only joined Yoto because my siblings were going there...."

" Why not do the things you want to do?" She asked the question many people asked him over and over. " Surely, you must have dreams yourself, right?"

" Nah, just following my siblings around is good enough." Beryl rests his cheek on his palm as he continues, " I don't really have personal plans anyhow."

" Mm, that's not good." She smiles. " You're wasting away your years, kid."

Yuki feeds herself another piece before speaking more.

" You know, I once knew someone with a similar outlook on life similar to you." She opens up, catching Beryl's curiosity. Smiling on the sudden memory, she elaborates. " He was so closed off as an individual, he had no dreams, only because he was never allowed to. Till' that eventually morphed into him developing no motivation to look for dreams himself."

" It was like.....he was trapped in a small world he believed was ' good enough '. He was content with doing the things others told him to, he never attempted the risk of exploration, nor did he really

want to."

" Really? And what happened to him?" Beryl asked.

Yuki's smile switches, before slowly fading into a thin line.

"....He died, without living a full life."

"...."

" He let others dictate his life for him, and when we separated, I tried desperately to look for him. Only to find out that after all this time, it looked like his seconds were up."

Beryl could feel the melancholy from her tone.

" I wanted to see him again, to show him what he's been missing out on. We could've traveled to many places together, we could've been...." She pauses for a moment, as if she realized something awkward just now. Her tone shifts back to her cordial one, she began to apologize.

" Sorry, I spoke too much. But the point I'm trying to make here is that you should try to find a purpose in life that affects you. Maybe you are content with just following your siblings, I wouldn't know, and I won't ask why. It's your business but.... life is limited. Freedom is not infinite. As you age you'll slowly lose your grip on the horse, so it's best to have experienced everything you can before you'll have to hop off that horse and start balding."

" I strangely feel motivated now after you introduced the unknown fear that is ' balding '."

" Pfft, it's not a joke, you know~?"

Whoever the person Yuki described just now. Must've been someone important, someone she held dear. Beryl understood her message clear and well, it was wise, he thinks. But he could never tell her or anyone about the situation he's gotten himself in, that instead of dreams to carry they were promises.

" I'll keep your word in mind." He says.

" You better." Yuki laughs.

.....

" Anyway, it's quite a shame but...." Yuki had finished her coffee drink. " I won't be able to get the chance to visit this cafe anymore."

Beryl's eyes widened in surprise. A strange feeling of disappointment surges in him.

" Do you remember the story I wanted to put out? It's approaching its final stages. And I have to dedicate all of my time to it now so that I can finally publish it." She explained.

" I see...yeah, we talked about that. I hope it goes well." He replied.

" It will, I'm quite confident you'll see it on TV as well." She suddenly said, which immediately attracted Beryl's lingering suspicion.

" Right..." But Beryl chose to not think much of it this time. " A story that will stun millions, I'll be waiting for it."

" But will I see you again sometime?" He asked her.

"....I'm not sure." She honestly answered before smiling teasingly. " Oh? Don't tell me you're smitten with me now."

" With you? Never. I'd rather start balding than ever feel attracted to a creepy adult like you." He blandly replies, earning Yuki's laughter.

That laugh.....so strangely familiar, he tucks that thought into the deepest parts of his mind.

" In any case, I'm guessing this is farewell?" He asked.

She nods. " Indeed. We've known each other for so little, but it was quite pleasant getting to know you, Beryl."

" Likewise, Sagami-san."

She offers her hand for a shake.

" Farewell, and I hope that in the near future. You'll choose to have dreams for yourself."

He accepts it, gripping her suprisingly rough hand and shaking it.

" Your hands are quite manly." He comments.

She tightens the grip in response, causing Beryl to widen his eyes from her suprising strength, so much that he immediately taps out.

" Ouch.....but same to you...I hope you succeed." He grimaces, and she smiles.

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" So~...?"

"...?"

" Did anything interesting happen, Beryl~?"

" Please wipe that grin off your face."

" Something did happen then!"

Tako immediately questioned him as soon as he returned behind the counter after Yuki had left. He was perplexed as to what she was possibly insinuating, but he doesn't want to ask. Knowing her, it's likely something outrageous.

" She's not gonna let up unless you answer her, you know that right." Hayate whispers.

" Painfully so." Beryl mutters.

" Beryl, c'mon! I'll treat you to dessert if you tell me what's going on between you two~ " She persists.

" Just entertain her, man." Hayate nudges.

" With what? Seriously, nothing happened--" Beryl was about to say until he feels Tamako's presence entering their zone.

" Hey, it's closing time. What're you three still doing here?" The 36 year old woman asked.

" Beryl has a crush on your friend, Tamako-san!" Tako quickly tattles.

" Huh? My friend? Wait...." Tamako's jaw slackens. " Beryl, you told me you weren't..."

" I'm not." Beryl deadpans. " Tako-senpai just needs to be taken to a mental institution. Asap."

" Phew, well...I'll take your word for it. I was going to pity you since this will likely be the last time she'll visit for quite a while."

Tako freezes at that.

" Yeah, she said so during our conversation too." Beryl nods.

She said what?! Tako turned to him in shock.

" Aww, poor you, looks like you were fated to be rejected by your first love, fufu~" Tamako teases.

" I had no such thing." Beryl was incredibly tempted to throw a pastry at her face.

" W-Wait, Beryl...is that really true?" Tako frowns.

" Yeah."

" You're not sad about it or anything? Surely you must've felt something!"

" Why are you so nosy about this?" Beryl asks, " Don't tell me...." He narrows his eyes in disgust, pointing at her accusingly.

" You suspected that a cheesy lovey-dovey romance would bloom between us...?"

" WOULD IT BE WRONG IF I DID?!" Tako cried back.

" Pfft! You're hoping too much, Tako-chan!" Tamako laughed heartily, amused by the situation. " I'll age 90 before I can imagine Beryl of all people getting into a relationship, you know? He doesn't have the charm of a gentleman!"

" Coming from the old lady, huh." Beryl comments, sending a piercing strike to Tamako's pride.

" W-Why you..." She falls to the floor in a defeated tone.

" That's a shame dude. Ah, by the way, even got to take a good look at her while you were away filming." Hayate grins. " You really missed out."

" She was super pretty....." Tako sighs in bliss. " Gosh, I wish I took the chance to ask what type of skincare she used!"

Skincare, huh. Beryl nearly chuckled at that. if only they knew the feeling of her rough hand.

" I could've taken a picture but that would be weird." Hayate said.

" Do you wanna know what she looked like, Beryl? You've gotta be curious at least!" Tako says, trying her utmost to revive the topic of love.

Beryl shakes his head. " Nah. No need."

" Aw c'mon!" She falls to the ground too, lying next to Tamako in defeat.

Hayate snorts in amusement. Serves the both of them right when they try to bargain with Beryl, he thinks.

" It's gonna be weird not seeing her around in the afternoon, though." Hayate mused. " She's become a regular, after all."

" Yeah."

" Will you miss her?" He turned to Beryl. " I'm not tryna' pressure you for answers or anything like that. But you did seem to enjoy talking to her at least, right?"

Beryl pauses.

" Miss her?" He repeated. Taking a moment to think about it....

.....

Looking off to the booth she usually sits in, he hummed to himself in affirmation. Deciding to spare his co-workers a few crumbs.

" I supposed it'd be a lie to say I wouldn't...."

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" Seeing everyone gathered here reminds me of just how many people were involved in the project..." Aqua remarked.

" Yeah," Kana, who was next to him, nodded in agreement. " A lot of people's jobs are riding on our performance."

" It's imperative we produce results and refrain from getting involved in scandals." She sighs, before discreetly shooting Aqua a curious look. " On that note, do you have a girlfriend or anything?"

" Nope. So no scandals or any dirt on me." He answered, quickly.

Kana hums. " That so...?"

For some reason, Kana felt happy about that news.

" Thanks for your hard work filming the show!"

Kana snaps out of her trance as her head registers that tone. Immediately turning around, she gasps in surprise upon seeing the author of Sweet Today congratulating her. Aqua turns his gaze to their interaction.

" S-Sensei!"

She couldn't figure out what to say to her. Kana clasped her hands, her nerves blaring at an all time high, as she tries to set everything aside to ask the one question she needed an answer from. That despite the show's bad adaptation, did the final episode at least get a passing mark? But as it rests on the tip of her tongue, ready to fire, she remembers the look on the author's face during the set filming of episode 1. Kana wonders if...she really had any gall to fire a question like that...

But noticing Kana's tensing expression, the author smiles kindly.

" In my opinion, it was your performance that carried the show, Arima-san."

Kana's eyes widened in surprise when she noticed the author's bowing head.

" Thank you." She spoke with sincerity.

" U-Um....you're..." Small tears began to prick up from the corner of her eyes, Kana quickly tries to wipe it away, the author's expression was soft as she witnessed Kana's own sincerity towards her work.

" Especially in the final episode....I only wish it'd been like that from earlier in the production." The author expressed.

Kana lets out a small apologetic chuckle at that.

.....

Looks like it paid off, Arima....

Aqua was glad to see the girl a lot more lively now that she put up a great performance at the finale. Though, that goes without saying, that it was only made possible due to his and Beryl's efforts to make her shine as much as she could, that's the way it should've been from the start.

" Hello there, Aqua. That last episode was well-received."

A voice shook him out of his thoughts, he immediately turns his head to the approaching figure of Kaburagi Masaya.

" Thank you." Aqua bows.

Kaburagi Masaya....

He raises his head again.

Was not their father.

" Things were tough from an earnings standpoint, but the goal was to give talents like yourself an opportunity." The older man goes on.

After properly testing the cigarette remains, it's been confirmed that this man was of no relation to him at all. At least, not by blood. And a part of Aqua felt somewhat relieved, but that only means the search still continues.

" Hm? Where was that young man who brazenly took it upon himself to direct that particular scene..." Kaburagi asked, looking around the room before looking back at Aqua. " Your younger brother, Goldenberyl, was it?"

" Ah, well, he couldn't attend. Please excuse him for his absence." Aqua says.

" Really now? That's a shame, I wanted to personally extend my congrats to him as well. To pull off a scene the way he did.... that was quite a talent." Kaburagi remarks before eyeing Aqua carefully. " And I've heard that it was his first time actually filming a scene like that...?"

" Yes, sir." Aqua said.

" What are the odds, huh..." Kaburagi mused before taking a sip of his glass of champagne. " You and him are with Strawberry Productions, I recall."

Aqua nods.

" Hm, you two possessed features quite similar to Ai-kun." He remarked.

An alarm goes off in Aqua's being.

" Ah...you think so?" But he chooses to play it cool. Don't give him a sign whatsoever about the truth.

" Yeah." Kaburagi smiles. " After all, I often saw her up close."

"..."

.....

" ' Up close ', you say? "

" If you don't mind me asking, what kind of relationship did you have with Ai?"

.....

" We worked together when I was acting as an intermediary for fashion magazine models."

" After that, on top of sending jobs her way, I looked after her in other ways as well."

Kaburagi lists down those things with his fingers as he talked. " I introduced her to quality clients, recommended good restaurants and such when she was meeting up with a guy unbeknownst to her agency, and so on."

" ! " Aqua's breath hitched. *The guy she was meeting up with....it has to be...!*

" Do you know whom she was meeting?" He asked the question, a little too quickly might I add. It definitely caught Kaburagi's attention.

" Hm? " The man raised a brow. " Are you perhaps a fan of Ai-kun? You're interested in gossip even after her passing?" He asked.

" I am." Aqua answers.

" Oh, I see..."

He hums for a moment, perhaps he could the boy's curiosity to his advantage for his latest production in the works...

" Very well," Kaburagi grins. " However, in exchange for the sweet info, you'll have to do something for me."

" You have a beautiful face that's reminding of Ai-kun's...."

He points to him with a proposition.

" So join my reality dating show."

" Ah, and as for your brother..."

I would like him to join as well."

~~~~~

" That's so not happening." Beryl said in repulse.

Aqua sighs, grazing his palms against his face. " Yeah, figured you'd say that."

Beryl crosses his arms. " Don't tell me you're going to try and convince me, brother."

Aqua stares at him. " I'm going to try and convince you."

" No."

" Yes."

" No."

" Please?"

" No. And that's final."

" It won't be that bad I swear,"

" Can you?"

"...Well, no, I can't be entirely sure but--"

" All the more reason to say no."

" Beryl, you're just going to be doing some work with the camera men. You'll be behind the scenes and not in front of the screen, unless called upon."

" Look, I thought we agreed that what happened back at ' Sweet Today ' was just a one-time thing, for Arima-senpai's sake."

" Yes, but Kaburagi was super impressed with your work that he wants to give you another opportunity to--"

" I politely reject."

Aqua sighs, exasperatedly. He went home, fully knowing that convincing Beryl was not going to be an easy feat. He was as



stubborn as Ruby is with her idol dream, but he supposes that it can extend to himself as well. Stubbornness runs in the family.

" I'm not going, even if you try to persuade me with the possibility of clues being there." Beryl takes away Aqua's weapon before he could use it.

" Let's search for a compromise then," Aqua switches things up. " How about this; Since the estimate show's run should last about 8 weeks. Why don't you try alternating your visitations? Come with me during the first week, rest for the second, come with me for the third, and so on so forth."

" That's still 5 weeks worth of wasting my time." Beryl shoots back.

" Look, this is the last favor I'm asking of you, I swear. Kaburagi is really interested in us being there, so--"

" Tell the old man I don't swing that way."

" Good one. But don't distract me." Aqua sighs at his little brother. " At least....consider it. I'll even treat you on the weeks that you do choose to come."

"...."

" At least take this offer with careful consideration. That's all I'm asking for, Beryl."

"....Fine."

~~~~~

It was late at night, and Beryl couldn't sleep. His mind was wandering all over the place, and so were his feet as he paced back and forth outside his house. His thoughts were split between the farewell with Sagami, and the bombshell dropped by Aqua. Both of which he contemplated with serious thought.

That's not to mention the fact that the first day of school officially begins next week....

" *Man, I'm hungry.*" He mumbles, combing his fingers through his long golden hair. All this thinking ended up with starvation. How amusing.

He looks up to the night sky, watching as the moon illuminates its nightly glow on the neighbourhood. He seriously wanted to avoid having to join the dating show as much as possible, he thought he could easily refuse but for some odd reason Aqua was adamant on having him be present there.

Why though? That was the question his older brother didn't answer.

Kaburagi should be satisfied enough that Aqua was guaranteed to join. Really, his role is a lot more important than Beryl's. Does *he* have to come up with something that could act as reason for Aqua to have him there? Well, to be quite frank, Beryl has an *idea* as to why. But it still won't make up for the waste of his time having to be there.

Man, he really was hungry.

" Hungry?" A voice calls out to him, before he suddenly felt a chip bag poking his arm.

"...." He sends a glance her way, she who stood beside him with a sleepy look in her eyes.

" Thank you." He accepts it without another thought and rips it open, smelling the sweet scent of junk food before eating a piece.

" Aren't you sleepy, Ruby?" He questioned his chip provider.

" Yeah..." She sighs. " But the thought of school finally happening next week is keeping me awake."

" I see." He figured.

" How do you feel about it?" Ruby asked him.

" Nothing much. Same as always, like all the other ' first days of school ' we've had."

" Hehe, that does sound very like you."

The two of them stare at the night sky.

" I'm....so excited. But also a bit nervous. It all feels..... a bit jumbled up inside, you get me?" She releases a deep sigh.

" It's normal. That's how you usually feel, no?"

" Yeah but...I feel that this time, it's a bit different." Her eyes soften at the moon's glow. " I'm joining a high school of my dreams here. I can train being an idol there, learning the knows and hows of entertainment there. So that one day I can shine as bright as mama."

.....

" She would be proud of you--"

" I wish mama was here...."

"....."

He stopped chewing, slowly swallowing it down.

" Yeah..." He sighs. " Same here."

" If mama knew of your potential, she would've reprimanded you about why you chose general education." Ruby giggles, switching the mood to a lighter one.

" Would she? I think we remember different moms, Ruby. " Beryl smiles in amusement.

" I think that's just you." She winks, before her face turns solemn again, her gaze departing from the moon and towards the brightest star. " At any rate, I hope you're watching us carefully, Mama." She says to the sky.

"...." Beryl says nothing, he's already spoken enough to the sky for the past decade after all. As ridiculous as that sounds.

.....

" Hey," She turns to him with an idea. " The three of us should take a picture on our first day of high school."

He turns to her as well. " For the scrapbook, I'm assuming?"

She nods with a smile. " That's what mama would've done, right?"

"I suppose so. Very well then. Don't forget."

" At least try to remind me!" She pouts, " I have the tendency to forget about stuff like this."

" If mom heard that-- *which she most likely did from heaven* --she would be disappointed in you."

She slaps his arm after that before heading back to the house. " Whatever you say! I'm going to try and sleep again. You should too."

" I will."

.....

Her footsteps faded out of ear shot, as he heard the closing click of the entrance door. Beryl throws away the chip bag from the trash can across the street.

His mind suddenly links back to Ruby's words from a moment ago.

Learning the know and hows of entertainment, you say...

And then back to Aqua's offer....

And...

.....

" Then how about we make a deal?"

" A deal?"

" When we're older, and you still don't have a dream. How about helping me become the idol I want to be?"

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He sighs.

" Looks like it won't be a waste of time, after all..."

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***Today is the day, mom....***

"Jeez, just wait a minute! This uniform is super cute, but it's pretty complicated." She said as she tried to fix her ribbon, making it look neat.

***The three of us...going off to high school..***

She finally arrives to the front door, Aqua and Beryl sighing in relief that she's finally here.

"Don't go making us late on the first day." Aqua comments, Ruby sends him a mocking look before putting on her shoes. His eyes evaluate her uniform and he decides to leave a remark on a certain aspect of it.

"Isn't your skirt a little too short?"

"You know you sound like an old man. So nit-picky about these sorts of things." Ruby replied, rolling her eyes.

Beryl decides to comment too.

" I agree. The skirt is too short, it's showing way too much of her hairy thighs. Have you ever considered wearing leggings instead--"

" MY THIGHS ARE NOT HAIRY. THANK YOU VERY MUCH!" She sarcastically exclaimed, slapping Beryl's arm as hard as she could but the boy remained unfazed.

*The three of us wish you were here to see it, us in these...silly uniforms.*

*As we embark on a new chapter of our lives at Yoto high....*

" Alright, let's head out before you two start fighting again." Aqua quickly said, clutching his bag over his shoulder and opening the door to finally leave for school.

Aqua was first in their line, with Ruby in the middle, and Beryl as last. But before the triplets could step outside the house, Ruby's eyes widened as if she almost forgot something.

*And we hope....that from heaven....*

" Ah wait!" She says, halting Aqua from leaving just yet. He turns to her, only to see that she was facing the family picture frame sitting on the entrance cabinet.

She smiles, leaning closer to it, as if she were talking to Ai herself.

" Mama, we're heading out now." She spoke as if she were still here.

And in her heart, she definitely is.

Aqua shot the picture a glance of remembrance before stepping out, Ruby following from behind. But Beryl chose to stay back for a few extra seconds, pausing at the picture frame like Ruby did.

He aims a small smile towards it, the sincerest smile, for his one and only mother.

"Wish us luck..." She was in his heart too.

*That from heaven....you are watching us....*

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"Ah wait!" Ruby stops both of her brothers again. They turn to her, Aqua with an incredulous expression, while Beryl remained indifferent.

"I almost forgot," She looks at Beryl with expectation.

The little brother sighs, taking out a small mini camera that Ruby packed into his bag the night before.

Aqua's eyes soften, immediately understanding the unspoken explanation here. *So it was for that, huh....* He thinks.

"Come, come, huddle closer." Ruby orders.

*If it's for her, then....* Aqua had no room to complain, only obeying Ruby's command and huddling closer to her and Beryl so that they could all fit in the frame.

Beryl shoots a peace sign with his free hand.

Ruby does a wink while playfully showing her tongue.



And Aqua just smiles normally.

" Say Hoshino." Beryl gives the prompt.

" Hoshino! "

*Click!*

~~~~~

Those three have really grown.... Miyako thought as she sorted through documents on her computer. They were on their way to deciding their own individual paths, it was at this age that dreams are the most valuable.

Ruby has certainly got that in the bag, but she can't quite say the same for Beryl and Aqua just yet.

Still, whatever it is they pursue, as their adult figure she'll be there to support them on their path.

Ding!

" Hm?" Miyako's focus went to an article pop-up notification on her monitor.

It read;

" Jinnosuke Naoe, head of the Naoe faction, facing heavy fire from the government as leaks of an illegal facility under his administration has been revealed, hidden under the cover of a ' Talented Persons Nurturing Program '..... "

Naoe...? Miyako thought in suprise. She's not too deep in politics but the party was familiar to her. It's said that they've risen amongst

Japan's political ranks like a powerhouse after a special showcase of their personally educated geniuses were revealed to the country, and later on-- to the world. It was said that these geniuses, starting from a young age, were under the strict teachings of the government in the aforementioned ' Talented Persons Nurturing Program '. But with the way this article is structured....it seems there was something deeper going on in the scenes.

Curious to know, she clicks the link and it takes her to the site.

Her eyes widened upon the content revealed to her on the screen.

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**" For these next three years, let us together--"**

.....

The three siblings walked through the courtyard, surveying their surroundings. Plenty of students were already talking to each other, or following the same route as the group ahead of them. They

assumed that this was the right way to class so...

" So for performing arts, there's just Class F?" Aqua asked.

" Mhm." Ruby nods. " The three of us can at least walk partway though!"

Beryl was lost in his own thoughts, fighting back a yawn due to the ceremony from earlier. He disliked it, and he imagined plenty of the other students felt the same.

But then a loud stomp catches the siblings' attention. Followed by a familiar voice.

*" Congrats on starting school here, Aqua!"*

As they turned around, they were met with the presence of Arima Kana.

" And Ruby....and you too, Beryl." She mentioned the other two with little to no enthusiasm like she did for Aqua.

Before Beryl could throw a crack at Arima's confidence with his words of venom, the girl went straight to explaining the school, making sure he didn't get the chance.

" Here at Yotou high, though the class schedules are a lot more flexible compared to other high schools, you'll still have to repeat a year if you get failing marks or don't attend class enough, and the curriculum itself isn't that different."

" But!" She makes a huge pause, holding a finger in the air.

" That guy's an actor." She began pointing to a male student.

" Those two are members of the leading idol group." She then points to two cute girls.

" And that girl with the big bust is a pin-up model." She points to the aforementioned girl. Enough said.

" There's a voice actor and streamer. A fashion model and singer. Over there on the bench is a kabuki performer and actress. And you see, the point with me pointing all these people out is because I wanted to make something explicitly clear..."

*" Everyone here's an entertainer."*

Aqua and Ruby felt intimidated by her statement, they could definitely feel the hidden weight behind her words. *Well, except for Beryl since he has no experience whatsoever but--*

She spreads her arms wide.

" But don't worry, I'll give you a warm reception here, my dear juniors!"

~~~~~

Class 1-F....

Right beyond this door is the start of my journey in the performing arts....

With that thought weighing in on her for the first time, she gulps nervously at the expectations everyone might make of her. What if she doesn't fit in? Oh, that could spell a death sentence for the rest of the school year. She can't thrive in isolation like Aqua and Beryl can. Nu-uh! She didn't possess those loner genes.

Gripping her hand on the door handle, she psyches herself up. There was nothing to worry about. Just act like you always do.

3....

2....

1....!

She slides the door open as soon as her mental countdown came to an end. And....

She gasped at the people in the room.

Pretty girls on her right,

Hot boys at her left,

This was heaven!

It was a bustling atmosphere full of all sorts of different entertainers. Everyone just possessed a certain 'vibe' that's telling of what they specialize in and the type of personality they have. Each step she took on the way towards her seat mostly comprised of her trying to suppress her giddy attitude and exaggerated demeanor so as not to creep everyone out and label her as the "weirdo girl from Class 1-F" on the very first day. Nobody from her middle school could ever compare to the students here....

T-That being said, I've got Mom's genes, so I shouldn't be outshone in terms of looks. Ruby encourages herself and she eventually sits down at her designated seat.

Placing her hands on her lap and taking deep stable breaths. She vows that she won't let this place overwhelm her!

Maybe greeting my seatmate can be a start!

Or so she hoped. But upon opening her eyes and turning to her right, she was met with the most voluptuous body type she's ever seen from a high school girl in person.

H...Her breasts?!

It's so huge...

W-Wait, you're staring too much! She's going to think you're a creep, Ruby!

Immediately departing her eyes from her seatmate's bosoms, she locks eyes with pink ones. The girl in question, seemingly blinked in sudden realization as if Ruby had just noticed her, and she proceeds to smile apologetically.

" Oh, goodness me! Sorry for starin'." She spoke in a kansai tone. Ruby immediately felt the guilt racking up within her because it was she who had been staring a little too hard at her--

" It's just....you're so very pretty." She compliments.

" The performin' arts department is really amazin'! " She said.

" No, no you're..." *Snap out of it, stop staring at her chest! " --Really amazing yourself. Are you a model? " Yes, like that. Focus on her eyes.*

She chuckles sheepishly. " Well, gee, I guess I am...?"

" I'm Kotobuki Minami. Nice to meet ya." She introduced.

" ' **Kotobuki Minami** '..." Ruby repeated as she shamelessly searches her online, in front of the real deal. And upon receiving the results, her eyes lit up. " Oh! You're a pinup girl."

" Ain't it a bit inhumane to google me in front of my face...?" Minami remarked but Ruby paid no mind as a blush began to spread across her face, her jaw dropping to the table upon looking at the images.

" I...Is that a G-cup? Whoa, these are pretty sexy!" Ruby says as if it were a compliment.

" S-Stop it...! " Minami covers her face in embarrassment. " Stop looking at those!!!"

.....

" This is my first time hearing a genuine Kansai accent by the way. Are you from Osaka?" Ruby asked.

" Nope, born 'n' raised right in Kanagawa. The way I talk is just...uh...a vibe I went with it?"

" You faked your accent all along?!"

~~~~~

" Just like what exactly?" Aqua muttered.

" Hello there. It's nice to meet ya." Minami bows her head politely upon introducing herself.

Aqua gives her a nod of acknowledgement before going back to Ruby. " Well, it's good that you made a friend."

" How about you? Made any friends, Aqua?" She asked, curiously.

" Not really," Aqua says after a while, looking off to the side. " Besides, I didn't really come to this school to make friends anyway." He said.

" Oh.....**so you didn't make a friend at all.**"

Ruby's eyes showed pity for her older brother. Immediately breaking Aqua's cool, causing him to look at her with apprehense.

" Sorry for bringing up something.....*so upsetting...*" Ruby looks away, she couldn't bear to stare at a pitiful sight. " *We'll never talk about your class again--*"

" I did find some people to talk with, okay?!" Aqua blurted out, unwilling to take any more disrespect from his little sister in front of her new friend.

" But boys don't consider each other friends right off the bat! " He added. " And since general ed has integrated their middle school

and high school programs, there are already plenty of people there with previously established friendships. It's a lot harder for newcomers like me to get close to them that way." He said before crossing his arms, finalizing his point. " I'm not some loner who can't make friends. Okay?" He ended.

"....What an awfully long defense coming from someone who claims to not care about a topic..." Ruby calls out.

" Minami-chan, please be friends with Aqua too." She said, turning to her friend for a favor. "It's a pity seeing my brother like this."

Minami smiles courteously. " No problem!"

Aqua's eye twitches at that.

" Ahaha, ya know...I get nervous when I think about how everyone around me is a pro..." Minami shivered a bit. " It makes me feel small in comparison!" *You're anything but small though.*

" Oh, don't be." Ruby bumps shoulders with her, attempting to ease her nerves. " This isn't a training institute or a film studio-- it's just a regular school. Act like how you normally would!" She beamed.

Minami gasps in amazement at her words. " Ruby...you're so wise!"

*Those words sound awfully familiar...* Aqua mentally comments.

~~~~~

Kana was currently guiding her juniors to their slotted classrooms.

" Now, I'm nervous..." Ruby muttered with each step she took, getting nearer and nearer to her destination.

Kana, who picked up on that, huffs. " Don't be. This isn't a training institute or film school. It's just a regular school. Just act how you normally would!"


~~~~~

*Right.*

" Well, based on what I saw at the entrance ceremony. There seems to be many good-looking students, though, none of which I particularly recognize online." Aqua places his input on the topic. " Taking that into mind, there's really no need to be nervous now, is there?"

" Well...you say that but...." Ruby's tone grows quiet, filling with admiration. " There's actually this one amazing student in class..."

" Hold that thought." Aqua suddenly begins looking around. " Where is Beryl?"

Ruby blinks. " Huh? I thought you'd know. So I didn't ask..."

" I haven't seen him since we went to our separate classrooms. Though he said he would meet up with us here....and yet, he's not *here* exactly." Aqua replied, checking his text messages again.

" Who's Beryl?" Minami asked, clueless.

" Oh, that's our little brother. We're triplets!" She said.

" Triplets?" Minami's eyes went wide as saucers. " That's quite something! It's not common to see that around this 'ere parts..." She said, completely amazed again.

" Where could he be though..." Ruby huffs, crossing her arms. " Knowing him, he's probably still at class, completely forgetting to meet up with us because of his daydreaming about equality or whatever."

" Huh?" Minami found that peculiar.

" Hm, I still recall during middle school when he went on an essay long rant about that topic." Aqua nods.

" And it didn't even correlate with the conversation we were having at the time either. We were talking about fruits, Aqua. FRUITS." Ruby reminded rather strongly.

*Haha...from how these two are speaking about him, he does sound like quite the peculiar person...* Minami kept that thought to herself, too shy to express it.

" We never did return to the conversation of fruits either, did we?" Aqua asked.

" Nope." Ruby answered.

While the two siblings were busy reminiscing strange antics from their youngest sibling. Minami looked around, feeling a bit awkward and out of place with herself in this topic, she had no choice but to find interest elsewhere until they let up on their conversation. Her eyes scouted the courtyard with no particular intention, until it landed on a certain individual that left her releasing a gasp.

" Yeah! And remember when he--"

" Um, Ruby. What does your brother look like by the way..." Minami asked, her tone quiet.

" He's like a bit taller than Aqua over here, and he has long golden hair like me but a bit shorter. And he has these sweet purple tints at the end of his strands--"

" I think I see him."

"--Which I find myself a little jealous-- wait what?" Ruby paused, looking at Minami in confusion. Aqua as well.

Minami awkwardly smiles and points a finger to moving group of boys, with one of them fitting Ruby's exact description.

" B-Beryl?!" Ruby screeched, taking a few steps back from whiplash at the view.

" Ah, so there he is....wait..." Aqua realizes too.

Beryl....

Beryl is walking around with a group of people?! And he's actually *conversating* with them normally?!

Minami turns to the siblings. " Um, should we call him over--"

**" BERYL GET YOUR BUTT OVER HERE RIGHT NOW!"**

.....

" Yo, dude. Someone seems to be calling you." A boy noticed, quickly informing Beryl.

" Ah, right. I was supposed to meet my siblings around here." Beryl nods.

" Oh that's them? Well, we'll leave you alone then. We'll chat with ya later?" The same boy asked.

" We gave you our LINE right?" The other people in the group asked.

" Yeah, I have all of it. Don't worry." He brushes them off with a casual wave. " I'll talk to you guys later."

" See ya later, man!" The boys waved goodbye before leaving Beryl behind. He then makes his way to Aqua and Ruby...

.....

" Who were they?!" Ruby immediately interrogated as soon as he met up with them.

"...My friends?"

" What did you do to bribe them..." Ruby said, pointing at him with suspicion.

" You're making it sound like I'm a scumbag, Ruby." Beryl blandly said.

" Beryl....since when did you...get so many friends like that..." Aqua asked, his tone sounding off.

" Well, they approached me first. Asked if I was a model or not, and if I've mistaken the classroom. Then we had a short conversation consisting of me shutting down their assumptions and from there....well...we hit it off?" Beryl shrugged.

" Ah....I see..." *Aqua's pride earned a critical hit from seeing his loner little brother suddenly become Mr. Popular during the first day, of all days.*

" You're not a model?" Minami instinctively blurts out of nowhere. Catching the turns of heads of the Hoshino siblings immediately.

" M-My apologies! I didn't mean to..." She began to feel bashful from all their eyes on her until Beryl shoots a question.

" And you are...?" He asked for an introduction.

" Hey, don't make her nervous, Beryl!" Ruby pouts.

" I'm not trying to..."

" Oh! I-I'm Ruby's friend, um, Kotobuki Minami." She awkwardly introduces herself.

" Hoshino Goldenberyl," He offers a hand. " But just call me Beryl."

" Nice to meet ya, Beryl..." She takes his hand, it felt strong. And upon taking a closer inspection at his face....

*He's sorta....handsome.....very handsome...* She thought. How his long hair perfectly framed his sharp complexion, his skin was pristine and clear just like Aqua and Ruby's, the shared features were made apparent up close, but his eyes are what caught her attention the most. It

" You're so tall..." She muttered.

" I've been told that, yes." Beryl nods before sending a pointed glance to his other two siblings. " Seems like between the three of us, I won the genetics race."

" Hey." Both Aqua and Ruby glared.

" Pfft!" *And he's suprisingly got jokes*, Minami added.

" Anyway," Beryl turns his attention back to everyone else. " What were you guys talking about before I got here?"

" Ah, right!"

.....

As the teacher was greeting the students and informing them of the necessary requirements for the school year, the sliding door opens and in came a figure that captured everyone's attention.

A girl with long hair, coloured with a sleek dark green. And lime coloured eyes, sharp and fierce. A clear complexion, without blemishes or spots. With such an alluring figure...

She was....

*Shiranui Frill...*

*" Excuse me, I had to go on live TV for a promo this morning. I do wish I could've attended the entrance ceremony..." Her tone was devoid of any extravagant emotions, but it wovened perfectly into her cool persona.*

*" That's...Shiranui Frill..."*

*" Shiranui Frill is in this class...?"*

*" Amazing...it's really her...!"*

.....

" Shiranui Frill showed up at our class!" Ruby announced, starstrucked by it still. Minami nodded vehemently, sharing the same feeling as the blonde.

" Her 9 p.m Monday Tv drama is a huge hit! She's a multitalented entertainer who can sing, dance, and act!"

*Huh, that rings a bell...* Beryl matches it word-for-word with what Tako said as well.

" Shiranui Frill is the first person most people think of when they hear ' beautiful girl!' " Ruby was straight up fangirling.

" No need to give me a synopsis. I know her. But you sure are infatuated with her, huh? " Aqua said.

Ruby beams, expressing with hand gestures. " She's my fave right now." She brazenly said.

" Hmm..." Aqua looked disinterested, turning his head to the bushes.

Ruby pouts, placing her hands on her hips as she scrutinizes his expression. " What's with that ' hmm' and that disinterest?! This is Shiranui Frill we're talking about!"

" Not interested. My favorite was and always will be Ai." Aqua says without hesitation, even having the audacity to grin a bit.

Ruby frowns. " Well, of course she's my favorite too but..."

" Isn't that her over there?" Beryl points out.

" Huh?! Where!" Ruby immediately follows the direction of where Beryl was pointing and there was the girl in question, casually passing by. Her long hair imbueing the gentle breeze of the wind.

"Ahhh! That's her!" Ruby squeals.

" She really is pretty, huh...even from a distance..." Minami whispered. Ruby nods in agreement with delight.

" You're acting like an ordinary fan of hers. You're classmates, aren't you?" Aqua asked before approaching her direction.

" Yeah but..." Ruby, who didn't notice at first...

" He's approaching her." Beryl says.

*" He's what?!"*

.....

" Hello, Shiranui-san."

Aqua had intercepted her path, greeting her lightly. She promptly halted herself, turning to him with a blank look that reminded Aqua of a certain guy he knows with that exact same expression. Nevertheless, he continues.

" My sister is in the same class as you. Please get along with her." He politely requests.

*" Oh god. Kill me..."* Ruby says in a crushed tone, animated blood trickling down from her mouth as her legs wobbled like jelly ready to melt into the crust of the earth.

Beryl drags her along. " Let's go say hello."

Minami also follows behind, and all three of them finally stood by Aqua's side.

" I know you. You were in ' Sweet Today ', right?" The multitalented performer recognized, catching Aqua slightly by suprise.

" You really know your stuff. The show wasn't even much of a hit as it was a flop." He said.

Frill tilted her head to the side, her eyes looking elsewhere as she spoke. " It kept coming up at one of my jobs. So I decided to watch it." And then her eyes return back to Aqua.

" It was good." She said, truthfully and with full confidence in her own words.

*Huh...* Aqua felt strangely bashful from her unexpected opinion of the show. It was mediocre at best, but...

" Thank you..." Hearing praise coming from someone as renowned as her was quite something.

Frill then turns her attention to the girl with pink hair. " I've seen you on the cover of Middle Jump. Your name's Minami-san, right?" She asked.

" Y-Yes! I feel honored!" The girl blurted out in response.

*Wow...those two are getting recognized by Shiranui Frill!* Ruby felt envious.

*Her eyes are like a lizard's...* Beryl mused to himself.

Until those same eyes turned to him, pausing. She twists her entire body's direction to face him, looking up due to how tall he was. Beryl stared back, taking this as a contest of sorts, and as the bored person he was-- decided to accept it without secondary thoughts. Everyone stared between them, in awkward silence. Wondering what these two peculiar people were doing until Frill's lips parted for a moment.

" Your name?" She asked.

" Hoshino Goldenberyl."

" Goldenberyl..."

" Just call me--"

" Ah, I know you..."

**" You're the hottie at that new Cafe everyone's been buzzing about lately, aren't you? Strawberry, was it?**

**Ah, and also that special assistant director that was responsible for that amazing camera work."**

"..." Beryl stares at her blankly.

Everyone was silent for a moment till...

**" HE'S WHAT?!"** Ruby and Minami exclaims.



Aqua facepalming.

And Beryl's eye twitching at that shameful call out, muttered.

" Couldn't you have just said the last part..."

*And so concludes the highlights of the Hoshino triplets first day at Yoto high....*

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

I wanna die now please. This chapter didn't need to be this long, but I felt lowkey offended that my 5k words didn't satisfy you in the last chapter, and then it just turned personal as I started this chapter....and then here we are...

15k words later...

Ffs I killed myself with this.

Ahem, anyway.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! (Seriously you better fucking do--) It took a lot of my time, sanity, and patience to come up with the flow for this chapter, and after publishing this I'm hoping it actually paid off.

And well.... now everything has returned to where we left off, yeah? For those that read the original goldenberyl series and made it to the small 'sample' I released at the end of the epilogue. Welp. here we are! The long awaited ' Beryl/Kiyotaka ' storyline about to make its debut.

But first will come the interlude chapter I'll publish in the next one. It's going to be a short chapter, and it's going to focus on Yuki's pov with her ' interview ' with a certain person. Hopefully, as always, you guys will look forward to it!

With nothing more to say except that I wanna die for like 2 weeks so I can recover...

See ya~

7.5. Loveless.

" A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity. It dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path. "

- Agatha Christie

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" Damn, she really is gone, huh..." Hayate remarks, staring at the spot where the mysterious woman would usually sit.

The week was almost up, and since that last interaction, Sagami Yuki has not returned. Just as Tamako and Beryl said. But the two university students still felt that the day was a bit lacking without the lady's presence, ordering the same ol' coffee, and a variety of desserts to follow.

" Beryl, did she ever say anything about when she'll come back?" Tako turned to her young junior.

" Nope." He answered, continuing to clean the tables after the usual wave of customers had subsided. " She said something about not coming back for a long while."

" Are you sure you don't miss her? Not even a bit--"

" I don't mind it if you make a fanfiction out of us, but please don't pressure your ideas into reality." Beryl cut her off.

" *What?* What gave you that idea!" She yells, her face blushing red in embarrassment.

" You have a Wattpad account, don't you? " Beryl asked.

" H-Huh? Why would I-- haha, that's ridiculous-- OKAY WHO THE

F\*\*\*K TOLD YOU?!" Her eyes turn murderous in an instant.

" Hayate-senpai did." Beryl truthfully answers. Hayate immediately stops at what he was doing, his eyes widening in horror as he turned to Beryl's direction with a look of betrayal, ' How could you....? ' was what his expression conveyed.

*" Hayate....."*

When Tako turned to her side ready to lock onto her target. She was left to realize that Hayate had already bolted as soon as Beryl established his ruthless betrayal, the door already closing, and his apron left on the table folded neatly as to not possibly incur Tamako's anger just in case. Tako lets out a beastly scream before throwing off her apron and chasing him outside, knowing exactly where that bastard would run to.

*" YOU'RE NOT GETTING AWAY FROM ME YOU BASTARD!"*

Beryl lets out an amused grin, satisfied with his work of deterring Tako's pressure off of him and redirecting it towards Hayate. Another plus was that he got a good show out of it too, feeding off of Hayate's horrified expression and Tako's cold glare. He was quite proud of how easily he can rile people up to do the most amusing things in his eyes.

" Did you make those two fight again?"

Beryl turns to meet Tamako's gaze. She looked unimpressed, with her arms crossed and her finger tapping the bridge of her arm.

Sighing aloud, she slaps Beryl's back causing him to jolt forward a bit. Once again, her strength catches him off guard at the most opportune of times.

" You're a really troublesome one, aren't you?" She grinned after receiving an irritated expression out of him.

" I could say the same for you--"

She raises her hand--

" Just kidding." Beryl immediately says.

" Good!" She smiles cheerfully like she always does before stepping to the side and picking up the apron Tako dropped. Folding it neatly with a sigh, then placing it on the table. " But tone down your naughty act, okay? Wouldn't want those two to have an active feud during work, y'know."

" They're a lot closer than you think, Manager. A small conflict like this is nothing to them." Beryl refutes, causing Tamako to look back at him for his elaboration on that. " They can shoot each other the nastiest profanities today and still come to work like best buddies tomorrow."

Tamako huffs before grinning in amusement. " Well, your words does hold some substance since I've noticed it too.

Silence ensues, and Beryl continues with the clean-up, a bit more of the work has been added unto him though since his two co-workers are out and about currently. So he'll have to do their part of cleaning duty as well. Thankfully enough though, he wasn't alone, as Tamako also took part in the cleaning duties as well, like Beryl previously stated before-- she was an active manager. Always full of energy to spend during the day, he can count the amount of times he's actually seen her get tired ( besides getting sick ) on one hand alone. It's truly a rare occurrence for the hardworking Tamako-san to be seen lounging about, slacking on the job.

For a moment, Beryl considered asking Tamako about Yuki....but... chances are, she won't give him a definite answer to his questions regarding the mysterious woman. So he puts it off for now, deciding that ultimately, it was probably an unnecessary thing to do since he's already confirmed Yuki was not the type of threat he thought she was, and add to the fact that she'll be gone for a long while to publish her " story ". Is there really a point in asking?

He should just forget about her, huh.

Or at least, forget the suspicions he has on her.

Still, besides his weariness of her vague background, he still found her company to be quite enthralling. Conversing with her felt oddly easy-- no, he might even admit that it felt oddly familiar. Everything about her screamed familiarity in fact. Her name, especially. He doesn't want to delve into it more than he wants to already, it might just end up with him digging up the unnecessary past, he shouldn't mix it with the present. There's no guarantee she's really the person he thinks she is....but it would be a lie to say that there aren't some leads pointing towards it. And that deep down, he's really *adamant* on that theory.

And to be honest, despite how sure-fire his instincts usually are, how reliable it is to assume his deductions are more likely to be correct than otherwise.....

*He hopes to be wrong about this one in particular.*

~~~~~

She stops the car by the side of the road, just ahead lied a big mansion with a huge gate, a mansion that was hidden and surrounded by tall trees. Yuki notes that the route she'd been provided to arrive here was specific, the open roads could not lead to here, so various amount of shortcuts and dirty forest paths were the way to go. This was done on purpose, courtesy of the person whom she's supposed to be meeting. It not only concealed that person's location from most standard GPS routers, but also helped conceal Yuki's arrival itself.

Her grip on the steering wheel tightens for a bit, she had to take a short pause. Preparing herself. Just like the grip on the wheel, she must be sure to have a grip on herself or else everything will go in vain. Anger is rising up like vile from her throat, and she needs to calm it down. Rampant emotions are not worth the conversation here.

~~~~~

Her car stops in front of the gate, and she notices a guard standing by the small pent. She turns down her window as he

approached her side of the vehicle.

" State your business." The man simply asked, though it seems he's already well-informed of her arrival beforehand and only asking due to policy.

" Sagami Yuki," She introduces herself with a calm tone, " I'm here for an interview with your boss."

"....Proceed then." With a click of a button, the guard opens the gates, giving the woman access to the mansion. She sends him a thankful nod before turning up her window and driving down the main pathway to the abode.

.....

An old man stops her at the door after she got out of her car. His gloved hands holding out a metal tray in front of her, his expression exuding politeness as he kindly asked her.

" Sagami-san, please put any weapons you may have on you into the metal tray."

Yuki had no qualms about it, putting the pistol she had hidden in her jacket, and the pocket knife from her pocket, all into the tray. The man nodded, satisfied, until he realized Yuki suddenly taking something expected and placing it into the tray as well.

"...A pen?" He said in suprise.

" In the hands of a person, anything can become a weapon." Said Yuki with a smile. The man awkwardly returns the look with a nervous smile of his own, even chuckling.

" Haha...well, you have a point there." The man doesn't question it further, placing the tray aside, he leads her through the main hallway.

With each step, dread builds up. Not because of fear for the person behind the door, but fear of what she might do to the person behind the door. To keep herself controlled, she fiddles with the

screen of her watch.

That is, until the door opens, revealing the living room. It was extravagant to say the least, but it possessed a quality of simplicity that made it look humble. The walls were painted white, with only minimal furniture filling up the floor space, necessary things like a couple of couches, a small table, and such. But the room seemed to have been rearranged in preparation for this visit, certainly under that person's command.

Speaking of which....

Yuki had not taken her eyes off of the lone person in the room, as soon as she entered. Therein was a woman seated on the couch, smoking and taking a hit off some cigarettes that looked cheap.

" Madam Mika, your guest has arrived." The man called for her attention in a solemn tone.

Her lifeless brown doe eyes open upon hearing and focused towards Yuki, locking each other in a tension-filled gaze. The man who stood by Yuki's side understood the silence well enough that he decides to leave these two to their business, formally bowing down in respect, before leaving the room completely.

Yuki was left alone with the woman she thought she'd never get the chance to meet. But due to circumstances, due to her new ambition--- this meeting was a must. If it was for success, she'll reach out into the deepest parts of hell and grasp at forgotten souls. Dig out all the skeletons hidden in this organization's closet, the investors, the hierarchy of staff, the business proposals and negotiations, the various ways they've tried to implement this project to the bigger face of politics.

And also...

An important previous contact of Atsoumi.

" Well? Why don't you take a seat, Sagami."



The living and breathing biological **mother** of her friend, **Kiyotaka**.

.....

" Would you like tea?" Her matured tone offers, " I could order one of my maids to prepare some, if you'd like." She says, lightly dropping some resin into the ashtray.

" No thank you." Yuki replied with control. The smell of smoke slowly entering her nostrils, to which she ignores and angles her head a bit more to the side to avoid direct inhalation.

The woman smirks.

" Why don't you take off your disguise? Let me see your face, young lady." She asked.

Before Yuki could reply, the woman named Mika spoke first.

" I understand it's not part of our deal here. But it'll help you feel more comfortable, you are a guest after all. Are you not?" She spoke with experience, casually showing off the hospitality that attracted many men in her life. Bits and pieces of her sultry tone seems to remain in it too.

Objectively, there was no real reason for Yuki to do as she says. Like the woman acknowledged, seeing the 28-year old's face was not part of the deal they agreed to via private emails. And from the familiar goosebumps of suddenly being watched by all sides, Yuki can easily conclude that the mansion was littered with CCTV. If she does reveal her face, then that opens a chance for Mika to use it as a bargaining chip of sorts and get more than she was promised from her. But Yuki thought it strange for Mika to suggest such an obvious trap, thinking that the bait would work. She knew this woman was smarter than that. The fact that she's even alive is proof of it.

Fools who get themselves involve with the White Room don't usually walk out without permanent consequences. But this woman did.

" You're worried about the CCTV, aren't you?" Her eyes trail to the scattered machines for a moment before returning to Yuki. " I won't betray you or anything like that. I mean, what good will that do me? My life is already hanging by a thread just by allowing you to meet with me when they could be keeping track of me somehow." She takes another breather of tobacco before speaking again. " You have my word, Sagami. I swear."

"...."

.....

*" My, my. You're quite the beauty. Even I wasn't that pretty at your age."*

When Yuki took off the wrappings that covered her head along with the dark shades, her long dark blonde hair cascaded down to her shoulders, and Mika was met with amethyst colored eyes, it was stunning and sharp. But what caught Mika's attention the most was the feelings exuding from such eyes, there was a variety of it, and with each blink she can feel Yuki's suppression of a more potent emotion. An emotion Mika knew all too well.

" You have good genes," She comments.

" Can we begin the interview?" Yuki cuts straight to the chase. Pulling out her envelope which contained several papers that are included in the questioning, or for reference.

" Of course, I don't mind. This is a deal, after all. However..." Mika raises a brow, releasing smoke from her breath as she puts out the cigarette on the tray. " I'm afraid I don't see *your* end of the deal being upheld."

" I'll give you the money after the interview." Yuki replied. " You have my word."

"....Hm," Mika smiles, crossing a leg over the other as she relaxes herself. " Alright. Proceed then."

.....

" Full Name."

" I thought you'll keep my identity anonymous, Sagami-san?"

" I am. But this is just for formalities, and safety precautions. I'll keep it tucked into my official files, your identity won't be shared to anyone else outside of this interview." She stated, with all seriousness. Mika could not detect deception in her tone, but then again, this is.....a specimen from that facility.

It's a risk to trust her to keep her word.

But Mika nods, deciding to be more optimistic about the rewards rather than dwell on its risks.

" Okay then." Without any more stalling, she gives her full name, and the rest of her basic profile. Birth date, current age, and other self-credentials that completes her identity. Yuki mentally noted all of it down before moving on to the next question.

" In regards to your previous marital status, I understand that you were formerly married to Ayanokouji Atsuomi. Do you confirm?" She asked.

" Yes. But after a year, we divorced." She answered, casually.

From the tone Mika used, Yuki could already identify some of the background behind those words alone. Noting it down, she puts aside the pleasant formalities and moves onto the more important questions that Yuki needed answers from. She begins to pull up the first paper depicting the records of their scheduled meet ups.

" How did you get in touch with Ayanokouji Atsuomi." Yuki asked.

Mika narrows her eyes before speaking, " The two of us met back when I was still working as a hostess at a rich entertainment establishment where many people of importance would gather for the warmth and touch of a woman." She rolled her eyes, Yuki picks up on the disdain she must've felt for her past occupation. " Atsuomi was among those people, and it was he who caught my eye."

" Why is that?"

" Isn't it obvious? For connections, of course." Mika tilted her head. " He was a young politician at the time who was steadily growing in power. For a woman like me, I found that the smart thing to do was to woo him earlier on so that in the future he would spoil me like a queen." She said.

But then Mika's expression changes in the next second,

" But to my surprise, he was someone who possessed an extraordinary amount of ambition. He wasn't just some miniscule man I could fool into bed and have him come for me every single time. Despite the lust he shared for me, he was also *very* controlled. He was precise with what he wanted out of me, and eventually our relationship progressed from there. " She confessed, not an ounce of a lie from her voice.

" I see," Yuki nods before moving on. " But continuing on from that, my sources say that you entered a business like relationship with him that extended far beyond self-satisfaction. He assigned you to very specific jobs tailored to your expertise, swooning multiple important clients within the years you were in contact with Mr. Ayanokouji, and procuring critical information for the man to use against. Is that right?" She asked.

" Yes, I've been assigned such tasks in the past." She affirms. " I've bedded with several men of whom I extracted valuable blackmail on. Then relayed it to him during the times we meet."

Yuki mentally notes it down before switching over to another paper.

" The information you're referring to. Was it in relation to scandals, fraud, money laundering, government bribery, and other similar vices?"

" Mhm. You'd be surprised how many men of such caliber are involved in those type of things. As soon as Atsuomi brought it to light with propaganda, the people quickly revolted against their parties and either they shut down completely or are left obscured by the public opinion during elections."

Mika could vaguely recall the many shameful confessions coming from their mouths. The controversies they were involved in. So

many incompetent men who were unfaithful to their dignity, to their job, and most importantly-- to their families. Mika held some sympathy for those affected by a man's ignorance, but overall she couldn't really care less, when it came to consequences she wholeheartedly abides by the belief that all individuals are responsible for the actions they take. They, alone, will bear their consequence once it comes for them.

" Have you bridged yourself in any of Mr. Ayanokouji's connections?" Yuki then asked.

" I know few people from his connections. Though, we never laid out any grounds for any relationship whatsoever. It didn't extend much as I was tied to Atsuomi alone most of the time." She answered.

" Does he pay you for the jobs he wants you to do."

" Ha! Naturally~" Mika grins again. " A man like that knows the value of money the best and what it can do."

" Do you possess any evidence to support your claims that you were indeed under his orders during that point in your life, or was it all just a guarantee of words?"

" Most of it was, however..." Mika calls for one of the maids to fetch something, and within a few seconds at best, the item was already prepared and handed over to Mika. " The difficult ones that risked my livelihood, and my life itself..... contracts had to be made. Official ones, kept in secrecy."

" Here you go." She hands over the white folder to Yuki. The latter accepts it and opens the folder, revealing several well-preserved contacts from decades ago. All due to it being encased in plastic casing for each.

*Dates, statements, pledges, receipts..... all of it is here. And readable for anyone to see.* Yuki thinks, slightly impressed by the woman's meticulousness. She didn't think Mika would take care of things like this once her job was over, a slight misread of her character Yuki supposes. But then the last contract-- *the final contract* --made her pause the hardest. Biting the inside of her cheek, trying to keep herself calm as she read it.

.....

" Why did you decide to accept this interview." The dark blonde asked, it's always been an off feeling she had since she received the confirmation of this interview. She has to be cautious around previous contacts of Atsuomi at all times.

" Oh come on, sweetie. Does that question really need an answer? Surely, you must already know." Mika thought it was already obvious.....but the narrowing eyes from Yuki as the young lady stared at her with a testing expression, conveyed that she wanted to hear it uttered from her lips first hand.

Mika smiles in amusement, before shrugging.

" What other reason is there? For a woman like me, nothing is more important than **money**."

.....

Yuki expected that answer, it was fitting of her character. And still it irks her.

*" Even if you had to give up your one and only son to that man?"*  
Her emotions spoke before her brain could think.

Mika senses the tension in this question. The look Yuki gave her was cold, as if the young lady finally showcased her true emotions ever since she came in this room; Repulse. Disgust. Hatred. Strong negative emotions directed only to Mika, for whatever reason. The older woman was given these type of looks in the past, usually from her fellow hostesses whenever she snagged a man they were hunting, they were simply jealous of her ability.

But this gaze was different in terms of reason.

The hate was stemmed from something else, and it piqued Mika's curiosity. All she knows now is that it's related to her final contract with Atsuomi.

Testing the waters, she answers. " Yes. Is there a problem? I was offered 50 million yen when he proposed marriage and *that* to me.

Additionally, I left with an extra sum of cash as a bonus reward of sorts, it was one of the best decisions I've ever made." Her smile was empty as she said that.

Yuki clenched her fist, the grip on the folder tightening. She already knew this woman was scum from the very beginning, she prepared herself mentally for this day, but each second she stays here only increases the flames being fanned in her heart since his passing. But lashing out is not in the cards here. Doing that will guarantee her lost, and delay her revenge even further.

" I see..." She managed to say, closing her eyes, and exhaling a deep breath before continuing. " But he also bought your silence on the matter, yet I stand before you, and you before me. Engaging in a deal that will shut down that man's ambition completely."

" If there's an easy way to make money, then of course I'd take the chance." She responded. " Speaking of which, I believe I've answered all the questions you have for me, no? I even gave you the irrefutable evidence to go along with it-- all safe and preserved."

"...."

" I believe you should give me your side of the deal now, Sagami-san."

.....

" Hehe, that's a very large sum of cash for a losing war you've decided to give me." Mika eyed the several bags of yen on table. And according to Yuki, it totaled up to...

" 150 million yen," She repeated, eyeing Yuki with interest. " I wonder, how did you gather this much of an amount? "

It's money that Yuki saved ever since she began working several jobs to gather connections for herself, and gaining some wealthy contacts from her father as well. Being sent abroad at age 20 to work as a detective certainly added to this success, and with each cold case solved and brought to the light, the people's public opinion of her character caused a stir. A positive one, that affected the agency she worked with and got her involved with other international crime prevention organizations that called for her diligence. She operated only under a code name, thus nobody knew

of her identity, but the trust she gathered from her connections helped advocate that she was someone who'll keep to her word and won't try anything that could pose a liability to the agencies she's involved with.

The money she's earned since then, was plenty enough that she could live a life of bliss once she converted it into Japan's currency. But she hasn't used much for her own luxury, only using for the necessities and storing away the rest. Today's opportunity was more than worth it to spend it all as the climatic act was set to begin in her plan.

" I don't believe that it is any of your business to know." Yuki clarifies coldly. Mika laughs in amusement, deciding that that's that and moves on.

" Oh I'm a happy woman indeed. All the things I can buy with this money..." Mika chuckles. " It was a pleasure doing business with you, Sagami-san. Though, if I can offer my opinion to you, please hear me out."

" I think you're reaching too high for the sun in this situation." She observes Yuki's blank expression. " Revolting against Atsuomi and the facility he's controlling. You're instigating a war that could end up with you getting burned by your own fire. One slip-up and it'll cost you everything, I'm sure you know that."

" You plan to reveal their darkness into the world, but that leaves the question of if you'll survive long enough before they can shut you out. I can tell you must have many connections, most likely international since not even Atsuomi, with the position I presume he still has, could gather such an amount on a whim without the higher-ups questioning him to rethink. Only a person with powerful connections out of the country can gather this much to give." She narrowed her brown doe eyes.

" If you're going into a war thinking you could take advantage of such connections then I pity you. This is his playing field, he possesses the power that you don't. The fact you came to me disguised in such a get-up that conceals your identity speaks enough that the odds are truly against you. Knowing that, you still continue to pose a challenge that could end not just your life, but everyone else involved. I must praise you for your coldness, Sagami-san."



Mika smiles, mocking her. " People from the outside won't be able to help you here. I hope you're aware of that."

"...." Yuki doesn't respond to her clear provocations. Instead, she began packing away her envelope along with the folder of evidence Mika has given her.

" Leaving already? Then I guess that means our business is finished--"

" I have one final question to ask you."

Yuki interrupted her, causing the older woman to raise a brow. The younger lady wasn't looking at her as she said that, and it left Mika thinking of any possible questions she might ask her. But nothing came to mind, she guarantees that the information she'd already given Yuki was sufficient enough to assist her in her near hopeless plan of fighting that facility. So what could she possibly want to ask next--

*" When you brought your child into the world, only to give him away...."*

*Did you not have an ounce of regret? "*

Her tone was solemn, forcefully suppressed. Hiding behind it was fury, and Mika could feel the tension radiating off her locked on gaze. A gaze that pierces the soul, widening the cracks, to explore deep within the true personality of a person before them. Mika felt goosebumps all around her skin after being scrutinized by such sharp eyes, she could feel the burning sensation that emanated from them.

But...

Along her anger, was some hopeless expectation for otherwise. Mika begins to speak, looking to shatter it.

" Yes. Again, is there a problem with that? " She challenged. " If

you loathe me, then let me hear it."

**" Kiyotaka is dead."**

"...."

Mika's eyes widened, just slightly.

Yuki finally managed to utter those words to this person. She awaited for Mika's response, carefully observing the woman's reaction. And it sounds like a fairytale, but she was hoping that just maybe.....somewhere deep down....the woman would break this facade and show any semblance of grief or regret for what she'd done. How she abandoned her son.

*She's his mother, she has to. There has to be a bond there somewhere.*

Mika looked away, fiddling with her fingers for a moment, seemingly in contemplation before asking.

"....How was he buried?" Mika quietly asked.

" Buried on an obscure hill, a single grave, and his name written with haste. That's all." Yuki answered. Trying to hide her bitterness, observing Mika's reaction to that too.

*A mother's love knows no law nor pity.*

*A mother's love is warm.*

*A mother's love is welcoming.*

*A mother's love is...forever.*

That's what Yuki believes in. That's what Yuki wants to believe.

*Mika, as disgusting as she is, is still his mother. The one who brought him into the world. She should care, even a bit.*

But from Mika's view, she...

" Hm, how fitting."

--long abandoned that role.

Yuki's fists clench again. Her breathing hitched as Mika's lifeless brown eyes turn to her, and with the audacity to smile as well.

" I suppose with his death means the complete end of my contract with him. And with Kiyotaka's death, then that means it adds more substance to your story, yes? It's a good coincidence." She heartlessly said. The mention of her son's name, emotionlessly seeping out of her lips, without care....without love.

" For you to say that...." Yuki began to glare. " How *dare* you say that."

" Did you seriously think I held any special feelings for him?" Mika tilts her head, cluelessly. " He was my son, yes. And I am his biological mother, I can't deny that. But all that aside, he was just work to me." Her tone involved no emotion. " And for Atsuomi, he was nothing but a token of trust with his investors. I had a role to carry, and I played it well as his wife. But after giving birth to his child, the contract was finished. And all that was left was my due reward."

Yuki felt the deep urge to kill her right now.

Mika narrows her eyes, " You look quite pissed, Sagami-san. Were the feelings I held for my son really that important for you to know? Are you...dissatisfied? How could you be, it's your fault for holding expectations here, if I truly loved him I wouldn't have given him away."

"...."

" Or could it be....rather than my feelings for him being important to you....."

"...."

" Could it be that.....*he* was important to you?"

"...."

" Sagami-san, were you in love with him?"

The puzzle completes in Mika's mind as soon as she asked that question. The swift change on Yuki's expression was confirmation in itself. When Yuki was confronted with those words, she was hit with the many reminders of the past, the missed opportunities, the regret that lingers like a ghost. Her very reason for revenge....

" What gave you that idea." Yuki tried to hold herself together, but she was see-through as clear glass.

" Oh....so you really were, huh." Mika now knows. " You can't lie to me now. I know the eyes of someone when she or he is in love. That's my expertise, after all. I take advantage of such an easy emotion.....but I myself have never once held it for another in a true sense. You, however, held such feelings for my son."

" Which leads me to think..." Mika hummed. " You must've been another experiment who was batched alongside him."

" And now knowing that, it just makes your reasons for a revolt even crueler than expected. Your true reason to fight against Atsuomi is to simply avenge that loveless child." Mika deduced, " How selfish of you, young lady. Putting everyone else's lives in danger all for the sake of failed love."

" You have no right to criticize me, Mika." Yuki responded with venom, promptly standing up and grabbing her envelope with haste.

" You're right! I don't!" Mika calls after her, " But what you're doing is risky, and can hurt a lot of people. I thought you were fighting because of a cause that you believed the White Room was wrong for what it's doing. But now it's revealed that it was simply because of your love for my son."

" What was once righteous in many senses, turned out to be selfish in the end. Answer me this; *Why is it that only my son's death was what prompted you into starting this crusade? What about the many others I presume to have died before, did you not care about them?* "

" You destroyed families, Mika. With all the men you took advantage of--"

" And yet you're about to take plenty of lives all at once." Mika

cuts her off. " All because of one death, you're selfish enough to condemn many."

"...."

Hearing Yuki utter no response, Mika thinks she won the argument. There was no way to win against it, the girl should just accept it. Deal with the consequences once it comes for her, if anything, this gentle reminder was mercy from Mika's end, an act of genuine help. She should appreciate that...

But when Yuki turned to meet Mika's gaze. The older woman was stunned by the burning resolve.

" You're right, I am selfish." She admits. " And I'm only doing this because I hold regret for myself. I never told him I loved him, and before I knew it, he was already dead before I got to see him again."

" You're right, I'm endangering many lives. Even if I win, it's not a guarantee anyone will come out unscathed."

" But I.....don't care."

Yuki's eyes moistened with warm liquid, threatening to escape.

" When you love someone deeply, you feel like you're just about ready to give up everything you have to be with them. Fight the world, if needed be."

Her tone was shaky, and many memories splatter onto her mind. The moment she fell in love with him and realized it too late, the treasured moments they shared despite the cruelty of that white space.

She was surrounded by white walls, and white lights. Despite the space being so bright, she felt trapped in darkness.

When everything got more difficult with each month that passed, there were many instances when she felt like she was drowning with no one to help her up. To save her. She thought, like every other child in that room, that she would die never seeing the light. That the dark would consume her, break down all she has, until she's nothing but a hollow husk or a dying body.

But through Kiyotaka, she found courage to continue. In spite of the hardships, she always put out her best. She always wants to be near him, she always searches for opportunities to talk to him.

Seeing him so calm in a place like that granted her hope. That maybe she really could do it, that she could survive and leave that space one day....with him. To do that, she must be strong, and so she worked hard.

To Yuki....

In a world where she knew only of darkness.

Kiyotaka was her light.

But she collapsed that fateful day, and as soon as she did...

She never saw her light again.

" I thought....you would understand what I feel, Mika."

There it was,

Her hope.

" But after what you said...I really am disheartened by it."

Her hope that was shattered.

" I thought....that as his mother....you would understand my reasons the best."

But she didn't. She held no love for Kiyotaka.

Kiyotaka was loveless, even by his own mother.

" You held no regret handing him over to that cruel man. You had an idea, I'm sure, of what they would've done with him. You knew they would experiment on him. And yet....you show not an ounce of love or regret.....it's unbelievable."

"....."

" You mock my reasons for possibly condemning everyone's lives because of love. But at the very least, between the two of us, I'm showing how capable I am to embrace that feeling. To prove to everyone who believed Kiyotaka was a loveless child.....they were wrong. Because I loved him. And I wish....very much wish..."

She closes her eyes, letting out a deep breath before finally saying it.

" To let him know that."

"...."

" You're no mother, Mika. I apologize for sorely mistaking you for something like that." Yuki smiles. " A real mother would have embraced her child in her arms from the moment he was born, and vow that she'd never trade him for anything else in the world. Not even if 50 million yen were there for her to take in exchange for her son." She shakes her head, sighing.

" I don't believe in reincarnation....but if it was real, I think he deserves it." Yuki turns around, beginning to walk away. " At least then in another life....he would've had such a mother."

.....

" Wait."

Yuki stops, but she didn't turn around. She thought it was over, that the business was done. And she already said all she needed to say to this person, all her feelings laid out bare. What else could she possibly want--

" There is a man you should be aware of. I personally think he

might be the biggest threat to your goal."

Yuki's eyes widened, she turned around to meet Mika's serious gaze.

" Tsukishiro was his name, as I recall it. Atsuomi introduced us when our marriage was announced to a whole room of people." Mika confessed. " I always felt a bad intuition from him, whenever I stepped in his vicinity, it felt suffocating. As if one wrong step and I'd be dead the next second, by his hands.

"....Who is he?"

" He's Atsuomi's right-hand man. At least that's what he told me. This is purely speculation from the impression I had of him, but I knew not to mess with him. I think he's someone more capable than meets the eye, he was straight to the point with his job of assisting Atsuomi, and I believe he's taken lives himself in the past. He would've taken mine if necessary."

Yuki didn't know what spurred Mika on to tell her this crucial information. Had Yuki decided to leave earlier, Mika would've kept silent about this...

*So what changed?*

" Despite how old he must be in current times. You should still be wary of him, if you want to succeed at your goal, that is." Mika warned her, sincerely.

"...."

Yuki can't resist it, the need to ask.

" Why are you telling me this? Why haven't you said this before? Why tell it now?" She asked all at once.

Mika puts on that damned smile once again as she answered. " I felt pity for you, just a bit. And decided to share the thoughts I've had of him to you. I hope it becomes useful."

" That doesn't answer my question--"



" 150 million yen is not an easy number an ordinary person can reach to. And to give that amount to someone else takes even bigger will." She gestures with her hand, " I'm a woman who adores pretty things, shiny jewels, and loves to keep herself young with all the luxury in the world. Nothing else matters to me besides that."

" Like the bonus Atsuomi gave me in the past, my information serves as a bonus I've given to you. You're fighting a losing war still, but seeing that resolve in you is quite exciting. I give you my sincerest good wishes for your victory, Sagami-san."

"...."

" With that being said, this ' interview ' is officially over."

*Now...*

" **Get the fuck out of my sight.**" She points to the door with a hollow smile.

~~~~~

When Yuki got into her car, she placed the evidence in the passenger's compartment. She leans her head back against the head rest, releasing a sigh of relief that the ' interview ' was over and done with. She really needed this breather to recollect herself completely after that interaction.

She was relieved she'd given up the pen before she entered that room. She's almost certain that it would've caused complications had she had it in her hand. The previous idea was to record the interview, but that woman didn't seem too fond of it so she didn't consent. Yuki decided to settle on the given evidence instead, twisting the story a bit to suit her narrative, giving a reason why the woman wouldn't agree to an audio testimony at the very least.

But in case she might actually need it.....she dreads the thought having to go back.

She almost shed tears in front of this woman.

" How embarrassing is that..." She mumbles.

Looks like despite all the training she's gone through outside of the white room, there's still parts of her that remained of the weak Yuki of back then.

But she's not going to drive it away. The Yuki of then, and the Yuki of now, is one and the same. It's her.

She has to accept that, and move on.

And now is the time to finally step her foot on the pedal.

She drives out of the estate, feeling revived with an even stronger determination than ever before.

~~~~~

" Here is your whiskey, Madam Mika." The maid said after pouring her a shot, placing it on the table.

" Thank you. Oh, and just leave the bottle." Mika said before the maid could leave.

The younger woman turns around, worry in her eyes. " Madam....it's not for me to question you, but are you going to get drunk again?"

" Is there a problem with that?"

" No, madam, it's just because....last time you got drunk....and all the other times you--"

" I'll take that then." Mika ignores her, snatching the bottle of whiskey and placing it on the table before smiling at her. " Go ahead, you can retire for the evening."

"....Okay...."

The young woman leaves, worry still residing in her heart, but

she was made to not question Mika's choices. Because the older woman always believed that her actions are her consequences to bear. To regret if must.

.....

She chugs the shot straight through, feeling the familiar buzzing sensation down her throat. She places the shot glass back on the table and releases a sigh.

" Expensive whiskey really is the deal, huh..." She mused.

But that was just a distraction from the thoughts lingering on what transpired today. Her current thoughts reflected on Yuki's words, like damned mockingbirds.

***" You held no regret handing him over to that cruel man. You had an idea, I'm sure, of what they would've done with him. You knew they would experiment on him. And yet...you show not an ounce of love or regret.....it's unbelievable."***

*That's right. She knew.*

*She knew the moment she gave him up, that he would be put through such hell for his father's ambition.*

*And she did not hold an ounce of love nor regret.*

***" You're no mother, Mika. I apologize for sorely mistaking you for something like that."***

*Right, she better get that straight. It's a fact. She is no mother. The moment she signed her contract with Atsuomi, she abandoned the prospect of motherhood.*

*She was never interested in such a concept anyhow.*

She opens the bottle again and begins pouring herself another shot. To which she drinks down effortlessly once more.

" You know nothing you petulant child..."

She said that with disdain. When Yuki preached all that bullshit, she wanted to shut her up any way she could. She was still a young woman who knew nothing of the bigger picture, a young woman who didn't know Mika at all.

*She's a lovestruck fool, that girl.*

For Yuki to assume that Mika got off easy,

That she couldn't relate to what it's like to sacrifice.

Truly...

" You know...nothing..." She mumbled.

.....

" Congratulations, Ayanokouji-san. It's a healthy baby boy."

The doctor smiled at her as he carried the child in his arms with such care. Mika closed her eyes, releasing a deeply relieved sigh.

*Finally....it's over.* She was thankful to put all of this behind her. Now that her job was finished and all. All the doctor has to do is to store away the baby in the nursing station and wait for Atsuomi's arrival.

" You should hold him."

--At least....that was the plan.

"....Excuse me?"

.....

She takes another shot. Memories of that day were resurfacing again, and there's no better cure than alcohol to drown it all out.

*Yuki knew nothing.*

.....

" There's no need." Mika denied. " Just put him away for now, I'll wait for my husband." She fakes a smile to sell it.

But the doctor smiled back, shooting her down immediately. " No. Please, try holding him. It's important at the very start that the bond between mother and child is established."

" I'm not sure if you're feeling afraid, or nervous. But those feelings are okay. They're normal." He offers the small one to her. " Hold your child. Those feelings will soon go away, I promise." He was insistent.

".....Fine."

Mika indulges in it, accepting the baby into her arms. Frazzled a bit by the small weight, it felt like she was cradling a fragile object.

.....

*An object, huh...*

*That's your fate, isn't it?*

An object that will be used as a milestone for Atsuomi's selfishness.....

She does pity the child for the world he's going to be placed into.

.....

Mika felt her body churning in reaction to all the whiskey she's

downed quickly for the past minute. It screamed at her.

But she's not sure which was screaming louder.

Was it her body?

Or was it...

.....

Mika never felt love her whole life. She understood what it is, she knows its significance and what it can inspire. But after so many years, she's given up on trying to find someone who could give her that love. Shower her with it. The bliss that comes alongside it.

She wanted to feel it so many times, but disappointment left her in ruins.

Eventually, she found it easier to just sell her ' love ' to men. In exchange for material gifts. And for a long time such gifts have granted her a satisfaction love never seemed to give her. Till soon, love no longer mattered. It was money. It was luxury. That's what mattered.

*Being someone's lover never mattered.*

*And being this child's mother is no different.*

It's all just artificial....

He was born into this world, not out of love, but of selfishness between two people.

This child is doomed to live loveless.

.....

" Right.....I remember." She smiles to herself, " It was only a job."

Yuki didn't live the way Mika had to. So of course she wouldn't understand, and it's not like Mika wants to make her understand either. Everyone has their own lives to bear, consequences to deal with. And she was no different.

She pours herself another drink, but this time her movement slowed down, eventually reaching a pause where she was just staring lost into the reflection from her glass.

.....

Her reflection stares back at her through his eyes.

"..."

Mika felt an uncertain feeling building up inside her when she stared into the eyes of her child.

She thought it was....quite...

*"...Beautiful..."*

*More beautiful than any jewelry she has in her possession.*

The doctor smiled, " I'll leave you two be." He decides to come back later, quietly leaving the room before Mika could call out to him.

She frowned at the door he left from, releasing a deep sigh. " Damn doctor...leaving me with this..." She looks back to the baby. "....thing." She muttered.

She smiles at the poor ' thing '.

" You know I don't love you, right?"

**It didn't matter if he understood her words or not.**

**" I never did, and I never could."**

**No, she refused to.**

**" You will have no mother. Because I don't see myself as your mother."**

**She had a black heart nothing could fill. It was just a void.**

**.**

**.**

**.**

**Despite that....**

**She cradles her child closely.**

**.**

**.**

**.**

**After the cruel words she needed to say,**

**She drowns it all out with sweet nothings.**



**" You are a cute little thing, aren't you? Hopefully you grow up to be handsome out of respect from a..... beautiful person such as I."**

**For a moment, she almost called herself his mother.**

**At first, she didn't want to hold this child. She wanted him to get out of his sight at once. But now... here she is, holding him closely as he slowly blinks his pretty eyes up at her face, causing her heart to unusually race faster than it should've.**

**She was never going to love this child. That was a promise.**

**It was a promise.**

**.....**

**A tear splashes in her drink, mixing in with the alcohol.**

**.....**

**She lands a kiss on the baby's forehead, smiling against his soft skin.**

**" Your mother doesn't love you, but she wants you to grow up fine."**

**" Your mother doesn't love you, but she wants you to grow up strong."**

**" Can you do that? Can you be strong for a mother.....who doesn't love you...?"**

**Her tone faced heavy restraint as she stared into the golden brown eyes of her child. A complete contrast to her boring colors. She found his, that was mixed with gold, such a beautiful gem.**

**.....**

**More tears splashed into her drink. Her smile was still there, but**

her lips were trembling.

Her grip on the glass, shaking.

Yuki's words repeat in her head. But why? That girl doesn't understand *anything*.

*She speaks of motherhood from books, not reality.*

*Not Mika's reality.*

She raises the glass for her to drink--

.....

" I'm here to pick up the baby according to Mr. Ayanokouji's orders."

A man Mika wasn't familiar with had entered the room.

" I thought he'd come here himself..." She uttered.

" He's busy." he answered. " But the plan is still in motion. The baby is still scheduled to be taken away a few days after its birth. Those days have passed now, and it's the time." He comes nearer. " You're free now, Mika."

He knew her name. She could trust the baby with him, since only the people Atsuomi trusted knows her identity.

She can finally get rid of this thing.

*So long, kid.*

"....."

"....."

.....

" Mika, why are you pulling the baby away?"

" Oh....?"

Mika laughs, saying she doesn't know. The man looked at her, confused, but still stern.

" Sorry...this is strange...I..." She couldn't even find the excuse to say.

She always found the excuse to say in sticky situations, but for some reason....she can't think of any except for the one she dreaded the most.

" Mika, stop stalling. You agreed to let the baby go, you signed a contract--"

" I know...I know." She smiles. " Just....hold on...let me think..." She says, subtly pulling the baby even closer to her chest, almost...protectively.

*Why is she not letting him go?*

*Let him go and claim her reward.*

Still, her arms held him close to her.

"....It seems you still have doubts, after all." The man sighed before turning around. " In that case, sort those out quickly. I wouldn't want to resort to grabbing him by force."

Before he left the door, he shot her one last look. " You have 5 minutes. Make it count."

.

.

.

" Heh...what a scary man, huh?" She mused to the baby.

She returns to the pleasure of looking at him. Her smile....stranger than usual. It felt light, and tight all at the same time. Her eyes felt like something was breaking at it. Indeed, such a strange feeling.

And her grip....her hold....her arms.....

Doesn't want to let him go.

It can't be love.

It shouldn't be.

But...

" For a mother that doesn't love you....." She can make one final request.

*A smile blooms on her face, the most genuine, the most sincere.....only for this little thing to see.*

" Please live long, Kiyotaka."

*She gives him a name. The definition of something pure, clean, and noble. Of everything she wasn't.*

*" Please live long enough....so that the mother that doesn't love you....*

***Will see you again."***

.....

***" Kiyotaka is dead. "***

"Hrrgk..!"

An ear-piercing noise rings through the living room as she slams her shot glass back on the table, a crack was now visible on its bottom, the disgusting liquid seeping out of the container.

" Tsk....why am I...?"

She frustratingly tries to wipe away these stupid tears.

What was she crying for?

So what if he died?

Who cares, right?

She's a mother that doesn't love him.

So why....

" Why.....am I...crying..." Tears mercilessly cloud her vision, replacing reality with those memories.

***Kiyotaka is dead.***

.....

"....Hah....haha...." She laughs to herself, pitifully upon the

realization.

The beautiful eyes she'd witnessed that day...

Will never open again, huh...?

Those precious gems....that can never be compared to anything in the world.

" Mika....stop crying...don't be so pathetic...!" She screams at herself, " Who are you to feel such things, huh?! "

She grabs the bottle of whiskey and opens it again.

*" Chug it all down. Drown it all out instead of feeling sorry for yourself!"*

She didn't want to bear with the consequences of her actions.

"...You have no...right....to feel sorry..." Her resolve finally sees its cracks.

" You have no right....to cry..." She slowly places down the bottle back on the table.

All these years...

Nobody could truly understand.

The sacrifice, the mistakes....

" You're not...a **mother**..."

*How could she after she gave him away....*

*But even so...*

".....But I want to see him again....."

*Her selfishness does not fail to show.*

.....

" She's crying again..." The maid mumbled as she watched.

"...." The butler of the mansion also stood beside her to watch the scene, his eyes full of sympathy for his mistress.

" Why does she...cry like this?" The maid turns to the man beside her. " Do you know...?"

"...I do." He answered with a sad smile. " She's a mother."

" A mother...?" The maid was only recently hired, and she tried to rack up her brain for any hint that could've led to that answer but...  
" How? She never said anything about that....and last I checked, there were no picture frames or anything..."

" You don't need to picture frames or certificates to know that. And you don't need to hear her say it to know that."

" Then how did you..."

The man sighs, before facing the crying, mourning figure of Mika.

***" There's a sacredness in a mother's tears..."***

She screams in her hands, as painful loss overtook her.

The feeling of grief finally hitting her.

***" Those tears are messengers.....of overwhelming grief,"***

She yells his name through her cries, begging, praying.

***"--Of deep contrition..."***

She was sorry. So, so sorry.

She wants to hold him again.

*She wishes she didn't let go!*

***"...And above all...."***

She hates this feeling...

But it's all she can hold onto now....

" Please....please....anyone out there....any god out there..." She says through a breaking sort of tone, she can barely keep it together, but she begs.

" Please.....let me see my **son** again..."

She has....

***"-- unspeakable love."***

.....

" Any woman who'd ever lost a child knew of the hollowness that remained within the soul. "

- *Brittainy C. Cherry*



-  
.....

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

Looks at word count and notices it's about to reach 10k

What am I DOING

I said this was going to be short, and that's how i planned. I estimated it to be around 3k - 4k but i somehow wrote more than I planned.

Well, I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

This was a bit difficult to write since Mika's character is very vague in the novel of volume 0, and it painted her as someone who rllly didnt care much about her son.

And while i didn't want to stray far from her canon persona, I wanted to make her at least hold some care for Kiyotaka in this fic. While not shattering her original image, im just tryna expand on it in my own way.

I hope i did it well. And I hope you enjoyed it! Even tho we didn't get to see much of Beryl or the Oshi no Ko cast, since this chapter focused solely on Yuki's POV for the meanwhile.

And I will warn u that future chapters will contain strictly Yuki's POV at some point, so hopefully u can look forward to it or at least tolerate it lol.

But anyway, this chapter aside, i wanted to include a segment in the last chapter but forgot to.

So i'll just include it here!

Enjoy~

~~~~~

[ If u seen this video. Then you know where im going with this. If u havent, then pls play it as you read~ this is just for fun ]

" Siblings."

" Siblings."

" Siblings."

" SIBLINGS!"

Beryl: \*points to Ruby.\* This is my sister.

Ruby: \*points to him too\* This is my brother!

" We are siblings," They both say before glaring at each other totally not menacingly. " -- And we care for each other!"

.....

Beryl: \* Eats pudding\* Everything we own--

Ruby: \*Snatches it\* We always share! >:D

\* Ow! \* She cries when he pinched her face.

.....

" Because we're siblings and we have the same hair!" They both flaunt their long golden locks to the camera.

\* one creepy switching of faces later...\*

.....

*Ruby: I like knitting! \*her hands punctured by needles multiple times--\**

*Berl: And I like coins. \*smugly displays his riches--\**

*" We both came out of the same loins!" They point to their mother's picture frame.*

*Ai: \*Laughs from heaven\* XD*

*" If you don't like siblings, well give us a chance!" They convince the viewer with proud expressions. " We'll impress u with our sibling dance!"*

*( One cute dance from Ruby and robotic movement from Beryl later-- )*

*" Hey what's that!" Ruby gasped.*

*" We have an older brother." Beryl whispers to the camera.*

*Ruby: You thought we were two--*

*Beryl: \*Presents Aqua to the viewer\* But there was another.*

*" He's always busy and he has short hair...." Beryl and Ruby observe, and Aqua's eye twitches but then they quickly hug him. " But he's one of us so we don't care!"*

*.....*

*" Come on, Aqua! Snap out of that trance--" They interrupted Aqua as he was trying to test new DNA samples in search for their father, " It's time to do the sibling--!"*

*Aqua: Guys, guys, I can't focus \*groans in annoyance\*I can't read, I can't get any of my work done. With you guys making this racket about sibling dances!*

*Ruby and Beryl stare at him silently. Aqua sighs.*

*" I'm sorry, I don't mean to be mean. It's just I have this role coming up for some play and I've been very underperforming according to our supervisor. We got general rehearsals on Monday, and it's important that I don't screw this up by acting so monotone, so I don't have the time to do a sibling dance--"*

( He joined their dance anyway. The End. )

~~~~ End ~~~

Hope that u enjoyed that goofy ahh segment LMAO

Anyways, see u in two weeks~

8. Recognition.

"He wanted to leave the past a few hundred miles down the road, shake it off like dust. But that was the problem with the past. It kept finding him."

- Suzanne Woods Fisher, *The Keeper: A Novel*

~~~~~

Previously....

*" You're the hottie at that new Cafe everyone's been buzzing about lately, aren't you? Strawberry, was it?*

*Ah, and also that special assistant director that was responsible for that amazing camera work."*

*"..." Beryl stares at her blankly.*

*Everyone was silent for a moment till...*

*" HE'S WHAT?!" Ruby and Minami exclaims.*

*Aqua facepalming.*

*And Beryl's eye twitching at that shameful call out, muttered.*

*" Couldn't you have just said the last part..."*

~~~~~

.

.

.

" You're wearing a sour expression..." Frill tilts her head curiously.
" Did I mistake you for someone else? "

" I wish that were the case," Beryl mumbled.

" N-Now that I think about it..." Minami turns to Beryl. " You do look....quite familiar. Wait."

Minami's expression lightens in recognition after remembering Frill mentioning that brand new cafe. A familiar name she's seen floating around social media apps too!

" Strawberry!....oh!" She smiles. " That's right! I've heard of it too, I've seen a few posts trending on Instagram and TikTok about it!"

And then a moment later, she gasps once again in surprise. " And the cafe name....it has your name on it, Beryl." She places a hand on her cheek. " How did I not realize that..."

" I would've much preferred you stayed oblivious, Kotobuki..." Beryl sighs.

" Trending, you say?" Aqua curiously asked. It seems like their reactions were a lot calmer than he expected.

" Here, look!" Minami was about to pull up her phone and show him the stuff she's talking about, but then quickly realized that Beryl was right there. And so she pauses and smiles at him apologetically. " Oh...uhm, nevermind. This seems a bit rude, don't 'cha think?" She slowly lowers her phone away from Aqua upon realizing that.

At least this girl seems considerate... Beryl thought before sighing, waving his hand.

" Just show him. Cat's already out of the bag, anyway." Beryl sends Frill a pointed glance, but the girl didn't seem to sense his murderous intent. Instead she remained the same with her calm expression.

Minami was delighted to receive Beryl's consent, and immediately goes to showing Aqua the so-called ' StrawBeryl ' trend, which consisted of many edits of a particular individual....

" It's pleasant." Frill said in Beryl's direction. The boy turns his head to her in response. " What's pleasant? " He asked, since he felt anything but pleasant at the moment.

Without any change in expression, the reptilian eyed multitalented performer stares at him blankly.

" That we met." Her tone was unchanging. " I've been blessed with this chance to praise you for your camera work in-person."

" My camera work isn't anything special..." Beryl turns away. " Besides, the real star you should've been paying attention to is my brother over there."

" What are these edits of Beryl..." Aqua asked with wide eyes. *" Thirst traps? What in the world are youngsters up to these days...."* he said with utter disbelief.

" H-Haha...yeah...this is kinda....uhm..." Minami was blushing in embarrassment, but her eyes could not stray from the obvious attraction with how these videos were edited in such a way, pleasing to the average woman's eye. But then she pauses for a second, turning to him with a raised brow.

" Wait did you just say youngsters--"

Frill looks over to Aqua,

" Of course your brother deserves high praise as well. In my opinion, it's he who helped salvaged the poor acting from the previous episodes and gave Arima Kana the chance to shine. There is no need to doubt that his performance was pivotal to the redemption. However...."

She turns back to Beryl.

" Your contribution to the product, evolved it even further. The camera work gave the episode a sense of a ' style ', after each scene was filmed meticulously from otherwise strange angles no normal set crew would've chosen, the whole thing felt almost ' grounded ' into the original manga's reality. It's an incredible skill that deserves praise."

Beryl silently digested her words. It carried such a weight, that even he could feel it. She was sincere, and held no falseness in what she was saying-- she was truly an expert in her field in a way similar to Kana. Understanding the importance of each role in the set, and how it can affect the final product. He only knows of her through the various praises people close to him have raved about her, his co-worker and Ruby for example. For someone as popular as her to compliment him on a one-time attempt, felt a bit gratifying he supposes, though not by much.

" I only did well because Aqua directed me." He shrugs. " Without his vision for the scene, my camera work would be mediocre at best, and downright garbage at worst."

" That's an interesting thought..." Frill remarks, seemingly disinterested in his attempt of evade. Beryl just hopes this girl isn't going to cause him more trouble than she already did for the near future.

Ruby gawked at the sight of her two siblings and friend being recognized by someone as renowned as Shiranui Frill. She stood at the back, wide eyed, jaws slacked at the fact. She was twiddling the outsoles of her shoes against each other as anxiety slowly racked up.

Compared to them, she's still...

" And you?"

" Huh?"

Ruby blinked.

And then her face morphed into sheer panic upon realizing that the Shiranui Frill was talking to her--!

" I'm asking what is it that you do?" Frill repeated-- gently, Ruby would add. She posed no threat of mockery whatsoever, her atmosphere the complete opposite of her demon little brother but...

" O-Oh what I do? Uhm....ah..."

The fact the girl she's been idolizing is talking to her....

THE WEIGHT IS ALL THE SAME!

Not to mention the fact that everyone in the group paid attention to whatever Ruby was going to answer-- and mind you, it does NOT help her at all!

" I..."

What is she supposed to answer?

That she's an idol?

" Uh..."

But she has no credentials yet to back up her status.

The only thing she can show her is the agency she's affiliated with, but it's bore no results yet! That's like submitting an empty exam answer sheet with the only exception being that you've written your name, dammit!

Oh god, what is she supposed to do?

Ruby, think. Think of a cool evasion right now! Don't let everyone here witness the shameful decimation of your pride--

.

.

.

But, much to her dismay...

Alas, Ruby....

" Currently...I'm not really..."

Speaks with utter shame.

" "

" "

" "

" "

Everyone stared at her in awkward silence.

" Oh. Well, uhm..."

Tilting her head at her, Frill tries to relieve Ruby's embarrassment as best she could.

"Keep at it?"

"...." Ruby stood there, defeated.

" Pfft--"

~~~~~

" .....!!!!....." Beryl sat on the couch, knees up, and his hands covering his face entirely as his shoulders visibly shook indicating him trying his best not to mock her.

Aqua, who sat beside his little brother, also had a hand covering his own mouth while nudging Beryl with his elbow. " Hey, don't laugh..." He unconvincingly tells him, but the moment lived in his rent-free.

" What's with the rush all of a sudden?" Miyako sighs. " You can't just come and say ' **We're putting an idol group together, okay, begin auditions now!** ' that's not how it works."

" B-But...!"

~~~~~

" I hear that girl doesn't have a job in entertainment." She whispered to her partner.

" Hoh? So she's an average Jane huh. " He whispered back, laughing darkly with his girl.

" FueFueFue~ Seems we've got a non-entertainer in our ranks." The brunette on the right mocked.

" FuaFuaFua~ Ew! So she's just a poser, huh?" The green hair girl also mocked.

~~~~~

*" I'm going to get bullied, Miyako-san!"*

" You're overreacting." Miyako sighs, taking a break from her typing and turning to Ruby with a raised brow. " And what's with those strange laughs you added to them? It just made it sound all the more outrageous."

*" They're definitely going to laugh at me, Miyako-san!"*

*" No they won't--"*

Ruby cuts off the woman's reply by pointing at Evidence A: Beryl.

Aqua, who noticed, immediately slapped Beryl's back. The younger sibling immediately gets the signal and sits up straight, pristine, like a noble's.

" Laughing?" Beryl says with aghast, looking around. " Who is laughing?" He feigned offense. " Who would dare laugh at my older sister? Well, tell me who it is! I shall give him or her a firm talking to!"

Ruby's eye twitches in irritation. *You're not fooling anyone you smug piece of--*

--Putting that aside," Miyako decides to interrupt here and now before another brawl escalates. " Like I said, putting an idol group

together isn't a simple task that can be done in a few days. We'd need to have a skilled scout that'll search and go through a number of formalities."

Miyako rests her face in the depths of her palms. " After all, I'm having trouble finding cute girls with a good personality."

" Then why did you let Ruby--" Before Beryl could even finish the sentence, Ruby immediately jumps him on the couch--

*Seems like fate wants them to fight anyhow...* Miyako tiredly accepts. Even when she tried to intervene before the fire grew too large, just a mere spark was enough to send the peace to chaos when it came to them.

Aqua smoothly escaped the tussle, standing up from the couch and going over to Miyako.

" Continue," The older brother was stern and to-the-point, unlike his younger kin.

" Ahem." Miyako looks back to her monitor. " Most of the motivated ones have already been taken into agencies. Or are auditioning for the more popular groups. It'll be difficult to sway them over to our side, since while we amassed quite a large chunk of popularity back in the day.... you can't really say it's the same now."

Aqua nods, understanding their situation well.

*" Don't get so cocky to be recognized by someone as great as Frill-san just because she thinks you're hot shit!" Ruby said through gritted teeth as she held on tight and squeezed Beryl's face as minimizing as possible.*

*" Swtill..... bwetter..... twhan.... an.... idwol widout a gwoup...." Beryl doesn't back down despite his slurred speech, tugging down on Ruby's hair in response and causing her to cry out in pain at the background.*

" What do you think about a freelancer girl, though?" Aqua

remained focus on the conversation.

In all honesty, he didn't necessarily want to admission some of the suggestions he already had in mind. It would be better if the group shut down without even getting to start, to serve as a wake-up call for Ruby to call quits....but....knowing her-- and the unpredictable Beryl --such a fantasy won't come true. At the very least, he can try to micromanage the situation as best he could that can satisfy Ruby's dream and safety, without any rapid movements from Beryl that goes otherwise. And besides....the last discussion he had with Beryl regarding this topic, he knows he can't turn back now that Ruby signed in as an idol. And a new promise has been made between him and his little brother.

" A freelancer? That would be preferable, yes...." Miyako hums. " It's a lot easier to manage than trying to make deals with a girl from another agency."

Aqua's eyes narrow upon hearing that answer.

*Let's hope for the best then.* Were his thoughts before uttering his follow-up reply.

" If a freelancer can suffice, then I know someone who can take on that role."

Miyako turns to him, suprised. " Really?"

Ruby hears it too, immediately turning to Aqua with excited eyes.

*" Really?!-- OW! Stop--let go of my hair you--" She screeches in pain, glaring back at Beryl's scrunched up expression due to her handiwork.*

*" Lwet gwo owf mweh ffirst.... " Beryl responds.*

" On top of being a freelancer," Her image forms in Aqua's mind. " She doesn't have much work considering how well-known she is. And she has a cute face." It wasn't a lie.

" Then..." Miyako narrows her eyes. " Who exactly is that girl?"

~~~~~

An hour has passed after Aqua told the name. Ruby immediately tried to shut down the suggestion, saying-- praying that there were other options besides the one he specifically mentioned. Beryl seemed to agree with Aqua though, and so did Miyako as the woman didn't seem opposed to the idea so long as Aqua's words are actually true that she was a freelancer.

Eventually it boiled down to the three of them ganging up on Ruby and convincing her that either they go with Aqua's suggestion or spend weeks looking for another one suitable to join the group. The girl in question saves time, and can quicken the pace for Ruby's idol dream to take flight, which was enough for the young girl to finally double down and accept it with a reluctant sigh. Uncertain of the storm ahead, Ruby and Aqua decided to discuss how their game plan with convincing that certain person to join should go, they went to the other room to seriously plan it.

Leaving Miyako and Beryl alone in the main office.

" You're not going to help them plan their approach?" Miyako asked.

" Aqua's got it covered." Beryl says, " He knows Arima-senpai a lot more than I do. He could totally hatch a fine plan himself with that in mind."

Miyako knew that too, that Aqua could figure something out with a high rate of success. But when you take someone like Ruby into the equation, the plan has a tendency to get messy. Unlike her brothers, the girl was honest and in-line with her emotions to a fault, the older woman is afraid the girl might fumble with the attempted offer to have the girl Aqua suggested to join them. Even though one would think that Ruby won't mess it up considering this is the path to her dreams-- it still remains a possibility due to the person in question they're trying to reel in...

But maybe she should really take Beryl's word for it. '*Aqua's got it covered* ', those are words she can believe and that's enough.

" Miyako-san, are you okay?" Beryl asked.

" Hm? Ah, sorry." Miyako thought Beryl must've caught onto her worrying for Aqua's plan. " It's nothing. I was just a bit worried that they won't be able to secure the girl--"

" That's not what I'm asking you for." He interrupts.

Miyako's eyes widened, her mouth instantly closed as Beryl stared at her with his piercing gaze. Did he see right through her? But what was there to see? What could he have-

" I've noticed it for the past couple of hours," His eyes seemingly scouted her entire figure. " You looked tense. Your expression had been stiff, and your tone sounded drained." He listed down everything he noticed was off about her. " I thought it was just from work, so I didn't bother to ask at first....but..."

His eyes trail to her fingers, which were twitching in an anxious manner.

" With each passing second, it seems like you're distracted by something. Scared of something, even."

"...."

Miyako turned away, her lips trembling. He read her like a book, she really doesn't know he can just do that. Was she just a bad actress? She was even lying to herself by putting in thoughts of Aqua and Ruby's plan all in an attempt to shut out the images she saw this morning. But with Beryl not falling for the lie, those images has once again resurfaced.

That horrible project...

" Miyako-san?" Beryl pokes her arm, she stills and turns to him in surprise.

" I'm..." It was right there, at the tip of her tongue. Keeping what she saw to herself felt sickening, she needed someone to tell it to, someone to share it with. But it can't be Beryl, nor his siblings. They're just...kids.

And besides, what if it was all just a hoax in the end? Those things are pretty common when controversial news like this spring up. It could all just be propaganda because a party disliked that certain politician to a very high degree. If that's the case, then there's really no need to spill her thoughts to Beryl, is there?

Her lips form an assuring smile. " I just saw something this morning, is all. It's been bugging me for a while, but I should be able to get over it."

Beryl thought about asking, but the vibe she gave off indicated that it wouldn't have gotten him anywhere. Whatever thought process she just had, it likely concluded with the resolve of not telling. Adults truly are bothersome sometimes. But if it's something she saw from the internet, then news will soon spread to his grasp as well, it'd only be a matter of time before he finds out what exactly is bothering her-- so long as it's not work related of course.

Deciding not to poke his nose in her business, he backs off calmly. " Well, if it's really bothering you. Just rest."

" It'd be pretty bad if our dear Miyako-san were to fall ill." He said, whimsically. It got a chuckle from Miyako as a response.

" I'll take that advice after I finish handling this last document." Miyako, feeling less bothered by it now, spun her chair back to face the monitor.

Beryl could pick up the lighter shift in her tone, it seemed that she managed to get some sort of release after he called her out on her behaviour and his joking remark. She looks even more resolved to keep it to herself, but it didn't look self-destructive, rather she looked confidently obligated. As curious as he is, he decides to wait patiently for the truth to come out all on its own. Forcing it out of her would just worsen her mood, and that won't do. After all, she's the manager of Strawberry Productions-- and the adult figure for Ruby in extension.

He takes his phone after unplugging it, and then proceeds to his room. His thoughts still lingered on what was bothering Miyako to such a degree. He stops by the room where Aqua and Ruby are supposedly planning for their approach on how to get that so-called freelancer into her little idol group.

" I have to personally ask her out? She's going to reject me, Aqua! "

" She's not going to do that. At least not outright. She's the type to hear out what you say before--"

" --Before she'll reject me; Exactly!"

" Ruby, just follow the plan okay..."

" Doesn't she hate my guts or something? I mean, haven't I been pissing her off since day 1?"

" She does. But she isn't unreasonable. Now listen...."

Seems to be going well, Beryl would like to think. A moment later, he decided to leave them be, I mean, how exactly can he contribute? He's sure that Arima doesn't exactly see him in a positive light either, just leave it to Aqua to act as the middleman in this situation.

Closing his bedroom door, he then flops towards the bed, releasing a deep sigh. He stares at the ceiling, nonchalance taking place of his expression. With nothing to do, one was left only to think. But he didn't like to think as his mind always led him to the darker places in his thoughts, the growing flame of a bad intuition igniting his nerves, and at the very end of that darkness is just a void; an emptiness. Just like....

.....

No. He doesn't dare to think of its name. No matter how many fingers are pointing to it, the bad intuition alluding to it. For as long as he can, he'll deny it.

The life he once lived is better off forgotten. It no longer concerns him.

With that, he decides to take his thoughts elsewhere as he opened the LINE app. Seeing the group chat his new friends added him in.....with already 500+ notifications. Beryl was curious as to what the boys were chatting about, so he opened the chat and began his journey of backreading. But before he could do that, he was greeted.

~~~~~  
**Group Chat: Men of the Roundtable** ✕🔥👤👤👤👤

**Takeo:**

Well, well! Look who's finally come online, boys!

**Shin:**

Beryl we've been waiting for u to come and talk dude. hru?

**Beryl:**

' Men of the Roundtable '?

**Takeo:**

Huh? U got a problem with the name or smth?

**Beryl:**

Yeah. It sucks. lol. 🤔

**Jun:**

EXACTLY BRO THATS WHAT I WAS SAYINGGGG

**Takeo:**

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE NAME? IT SOUNDS ALRIGHT DOESN'T IT?!

**Jun:**

nah bro pls wake up and realize the truth. Change the name im begging u 🤔🤔 even beryl says it sucks

**Asahi:**

Hey come on Jun. Just let it be, we've literally gone over this 2 hours ago and im not gonna come back to this gc just to get a playback. Get over it 🙄

**Takeo:**

**Asahi u dont think it sucks ryt??**

**Asahi:**

**No.... but I do think it's cringe.**

**Jun:**

**DAMN EVEN HE AGREES**

**Takeo:**

**Ya'll r hoes fr. If YOU got any ideas then plz do tell, I'd LOVE to hear it.**

**Shin:**

**Here we go...**

**Beryl:**

**U guys do that. I'll just go ahead and backread everything.**

**Shin:**

**Alright man...**

~~~~~

Takeo,

Shin,

Jun,

Asahi,

This was what the group consisted of. The four boys who took Beryl in during the morning break, with Takeo being the most forward person there is in the class, immediately asking him if he entered the wrong class because of the way he looked. Thinking that Beryl was a model, he offered to lead the golden haired boy into the performing arts section.

Beryl could still remember the look on his face when Beryl insisted (rather blandly, he might add...) that he had definitely taken general education over performing arts. It took a while for everyone to recover from the news, most of them, especially the

girls, seemingly in disbelief of it. But whatever doubt they may have had was soon wiped away when the homeroom teacher arrived and confirmed it herself that Beryl is indeed in the right classroom. From thereon, that's when Takeo-- followed by his company --began shooting questions at Beryl left and right, with the latter answering amused.

And he supposes....that's the story of how he was adopted into their group.

Ignoring the multiple messages of the bubbling argument that was happening in the chat, Beryl scrolled all the way back to when the group chat was first established. Nothing much was going on in the first hour mark, with only simple pleasantries being exchanged between the guys sharing how excited they are for the rest of the school year. Planning and such.

And then after that began their countless pings telling Beryl to come online. To which the boy skipped past, and stopped to where the conversation actually gets somewhat interesting-- they talked about girls they'd go for and embarrassing memories from middle school. An example being Takeo had a knack for constantly bumping his face straight into a locker due to his lack of attention.

" Hm...I wonder if it could still happen *now*..." Beryl mused.

.....

After finishing scrolling to the latest message, Beryl decided to pop in back the conversation.

~~~~~

**Beryl:**  
**Alright I'm caught up.**

**Takeo:**  
**hey vote on the poll for the group chat rename.**

Beryl:

You guys are still on about that?

Shin:

Look how about you and jun just agree to disagree? personally, i dont mind the name as it is.

Asahi:

Yeah, honestly couldn't care less. Just plz get along. 🤦

Takeo:

Jun oughta come up and say it to me first!

Beryl:

That's asking the impossible, I don't know you guys that well yet but from the 2 hour argument I just read through. I can safely say the both of you are stubborn rocks.

Jun:

Hey guys

Takeo:

Oh look who showed up. Ready to finally concede my friend?

Jun:

What? Dude im over it. Anyway did you guys see the latest news that's been trending like crazy on tiktok, instagram, and twitter? Every social media app i open it's sitting there dude.

Shin:

Fr? I didnt open any social media the whole day. So what's up?

Asahi:

Same here, imma check it rn

Takeo:

Got a link Jun?

Jun:

bruh just open your app. But sure, i'll just drop it here. tho be prepared, it's kinda scuffed.

~~~~~

For some reason, Beryl's fingers began to twitch suddenly after seeing the switch of topic. The topic being whatever Jun wanted to share, it caused an uncomfortable feeling to well up in his stomach. He furrowed his eyebrows, trying to calm himself down and perhaps brush it all away-- but things didn't come that easy. *His bad intuition from earlier....could it be that..*

Ding!

Before he could finish the thought, Jun had already sent the link.

"...."

Without another word, another thought. He pressed the link.

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" It's day two, Mama." Ruby, with her hands clasped in prayer, fidgeted wildly. " And... I've got a huge plan today. and I'm....nervous as heck!"

Closing her eyes tightly and leaning her head against her prayerful hands, she releases a deep sigh. " Please watch over us

today as well." She asked, earnestly from her mother's picture frame.

She was reluctant for what's to come, about what she has to do in order to fire up her career from now on. Recruiting that certain person is either going to be success or a natural disaster, or maybe in-between where the purgatory lies. Who knows? Ruby certainly doesn't! Uncertainty welled up inside, and hesitation was tugging on her heart, but she knows that if they manage to successfully pull her in the business. Then it's a huge leap in the right direction.

Suddenly, she felt a new presence enter the living room, the shuffling of fabric sounding from next to her. She turns her head to the now occupied space next to her, it was Beryl. He was finally dressed in his uniform, his long hair tied into a low pony tail, silently clasping his hands in prayer too and closing his eyes as he 'spoke' to mom just like she did.

She stays silent, and continues with her prayers too. She was just about to finish anyway.

.....

" Look who's finally ready." Ruby breaks the solemn silence after they both finished and stood up.

Her hands rested on her hips as she stared up at him, though he didn't seem to pay her any mind as he grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

" Sorry." Was his only acknowledgement, which made Ruby puzzled.

*No sassy comeback? Nothing?* She narrowed her eyes in suspicion before following him from behind to the front door where Aqua patiently waited.

" Ready?" He asked the two of them.

" Mhm!" Ruby gave a positive hum, while Beryl lets out a little '



yeah ' to follow.

Aqua's eyes instinctively observes his younger sibling's appearance, just out of habit making sure that they weren't missing anything important or if their attire was worn appropriately. But soon he found himself stopping his gaze at Beryl.

Ruby's eyes follow her brother's gaze as well, glancing at Beryl with a questioning look.

"What?" Beryl decided to ask, having enough of Ruby and Aqua's staring.

"Did you get any sleep?" Aqua asked before pointing towards the dark tired pigment that formed under Beryl's eyes.

"....." Beryl sighs before shrugging it off. "No, not really." He answered, there was no use to lie. Aqua would've probably called him out on it.

"Beryl you should really take care of your complexion, we may have Mama's beautiful genes but it can still be tainted due to one's negligence, ya know!" Ruby scolded, her tone oozing of obnoxious righteousness that was basically asking for a beatdown from the taller boy.

But....

"Perhaps you're right. For once." Beryl replied blandly, which was not unusual but this wasn't the typical Beryl response anyone would expect when it's in response to a provocation from Ruby.

*Okay, something is DEFINITELY off here...* Ruby's suspicions only increased, she looked towards Aqua to see if he was catching onto this too, but of course, the older brother was quick to notice this un-Beryl like behaviour.

".....Well, we should go." Aqua turns around, heading out the

front door. " We're going to end up being late if we continue staying here."

Beryl's expression was deep in thinking, and it reaches a certain point where Aqua could no longer guess. The mysterious factor with Beryl ever since childhood still remains, it just lies there dormant. He seemed fine yesterday when they got home, so what's up with him all of a sudden? All these questions were itching to confront the person in question, but he doubts he'll be given an honest answer. That's just how Beryl is. But more importantly, this wasn't the right time to confront him, it's best to wait for a better opportunity to increase his odds of resolving whatever in particular ails him at the moment.

*Though, it is possible he's just having one of ' those ' days....* Aqua considered it, indeed. It's a phenomenon shared with the majority of people where you wake up and just feel down in the dumps for some unexplainable reason and the effects could last for up to the whole day and possibly even extend a few more, to even weeks after it sprouted. If that's the case then that just gives Aqua more of a reason to wait it out and observe if Beryl would return to his usual mood overtime, and if he fails to, then confrontation is inevitable.

While Aqua had already headed out, Ruby still glanced at Beryl worryingly. But nonetheless, she followed Aqua and soon Beryl followed her.

the Hoshino Triplets have left the house.

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" Did you guys read that article? "

" The one that was trending? Yeah, I did. "

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" I could hardly sleep, my brain just kept thinking about those poor children..."

" To think that actual adults-- from our government no less --even started such a project.....it's.....so cruel."

" Do they not have hearts? They're just kids.... it's so hard to believe there's people capable of doing such things....to *kids*."

" This is far, far worse than just abuse."

.....

It was all everyone was talking about when Beryl took his seat in the class. The news spread overnight, and it should've reached all of Japan by now. It was a scandal-- no, to call it a ' scandal ' would be an understatement in the eyes of society. It was a heinous crime. And once it's brought to light, everyone would throw all their hate onto the people who headed the crime.

Like now, each student expressed their sympathy for the countless victims the article had mentioned, and showed a great amount of anger for the people in the government. A project that

experimented on mere children, and as they grow, so will the tests. Those who kickstarted this project initially named it under the moniker of ' Talented Persons Nurturing Program ' where it offers a private education managed by the government to volunteer children at an isolate facility in Japan's outskirts. But it was all just a disguise. A mask to hide the truth of it all.

Children were subjected to what many people would refer to as ' torture ' in the place of discipline. The way it was described in the article was incredibly detailed, and graphic, along with even footage of how the curriculum went on a day-to-day basis. Swamped with various written tests that exceeded past what's expected of a child at their pre-pubescent years, and then as their bodies grow a more solid foundation; Are then forced to engage in combat tests.

But said tests were not particularly handled with the consideration of the children's opinion, as they were treated like soldiers with their punishments and required output by the end of the week. Blood was not an uncommon stain to be found on the sterile white floor. These combat tests are likely what's on people's minds when they think of this place. The many exhausted children, over-exerting their mental capacities and physical capabilities all in a politician's goal to push past his adversaries with a ' breakthrough ' in education. This is the impression left by that place...

By that project...

" The White Room..."

Takeo muttered, leaning his cheek to his open palm as he spoke with his friends. Beryl snapped out of his thoughts, hearing that name...again. Felt somewhat unnerving.

No, rather than unnerving per say....

It felt incredibly abnormal to hear the name being muttered from an unsuspecting individual, a mere teenager, like Takeo.

" Says here various news stations are going to keep a close eye on

this controversial topic." Shin relayed what he's reading from the new posts this morning. " That's to be expected though...."

" Just when I thought humans can't end up becoming worse..." Jun muses.

" You're human too." Takeo points the obvious, earning a scoff from the former.

" You don't see me running around experimenting on children though, do you?" Jun rolls his eyes before leaning back on his seat with his arms crossed. " That is to say, only real demons would ever do these type of things-- let alone think --of doing those things. The people backing up this project are scum with no humanity left."

" It's....a really terrible situation." Asahi sighs. " As someone with a younger brother, I couldn't even imagine how I'd feel if people like that just suddenly take him away....and put him through these inhumane experiments."

Beryl gazes to the window as his friends continue to discuss about the White Room. And to him, it still felt bizarre that it's being discussed upon so openly. He never would've thought that there was someone in the world who sought to bring the darkness into the light, he should've guessed though since.....

So this is what you meant all along... Beryl pictures that mysterious woman in his mind. *Why did you do it, Yuki?* He wanted to ask her. He wondered what was her motivation into doing this, anyone who knew of the project would've surely put themselves under risk if they'd caught onto a plan like this.

Nobody in their right mind, with the knowledge of it all-- would ever try to attempt such foolishness. Once you're connected to a place like the white room, you're practically bound to it. Trying to fight against it would be futile, even for a student or a close associate of the one heading the project. But...

Yuki is out there, directly challenging them. With bold confidence, she is risking herself and everyone close to her in this war she started. At first, Beryl thinks she wouldn't win, not even a

smidge of a chance but then he dived into the logic more, from Yuki's perspective. And concluded that Yuki wasn't stupid enough to start a war without a ton of tricks up her sleeve. It's the minimum you could expect out of anyone, really. But even the bare minimum can give a fighting chance...

I'm certain that the article alone doesn't present all the evidence....it's just a basic summary, in preparation for what's about to come next.

Although he still wonders what are her exact motivations in doing this, despite the fact she could've lived a normal life after being released from the facility long ago. And his reserved questions as to what she did in the span of a decade and a half gathering the 'materials' necessary. Beryl was far more concerned as to how this could affect him instead. Her actions have a possibility of extending to him again.

Just when he thought he could truly leave it behind, the past caught up to him. Though there's not yet a proper connection that bridges his involvement, as long as the possibility exists; he's already at risk. But even then, that's not where Beryl's deepest concerns lie at all....

It was to his family.

The bond he never thought he could have.

What if this affects them?

This is where the problem starts. Atsuomi is a meticulous man, it wouldn't be far-fetched to say that he would search for the mysterious woman's background for information as to who Yuki could be, unbeknownst to the fact that she was a previous student of the White Room. She has yet to reveal that fact, but Beryl is sure that she would present herself as evidence when the time comes. For now he could guess that keeping her identity a secret and wearing a disguise to conceal her features is of utmost priority. But

as he thought earlier, the situation can prove detrimental to his family.

It's possible they'll trace her steps to the cafe, everyone including the manager and his co-workers would be interrogated. And even their background will receive a thorough search from Atsuomi's team, and then by process of elimination, all the priority will be placed unto Tamako and Beryl-- *the two individuals who spoke with Yuki the most.*

it will trouble the people Beryl has come to be fond of. Even if Beryl gives them all the information they need, he'll still be silenced. Put to death, *again*. And yet that would still end up being the best case scenario Beryl has thought of if ever that comes to pass, the worst case would be that not only he would be put to death or be forced to sign some form of contract that would restrict his access to the world, it would be that his family might have to go through it as well. A strict contract, or be killed.

.....

Ruby, Aqua, Miyako...

.....

He's got too much to lose...

"--Hey Ber--l..."

--He made a promise to her. The ' her ' that is his mother, and to his sister.

"--Ber--yl? "

--He has to do everything he can to keep his promises, to keep those three *alive*.

"--Hey, Beryl--! "

He can't go through that pain again....

His hand instinctively raises itself and catches a small crumpled piece of scratch paper that'd thrown in his direction. The boys' eyes widened in surprise at Beryl's incredible reflex-- without even looking. As if he could just sense it. Finally, Beryl tears his gaze away from the window and looks at the crumpled ball of paper he has in his hand.

"Woah...cool reflexes man!" Takeo was quick to praise. "Sorry about throwing it at you though, you didn't seem to hear me calling your name-- *And whoa, what's with that scary face?*"

Scary face? Beryl repeated in his head. Was he actually putting on an expression that could be considered as that?

Judging by Takeo's genuine surprise, it wasn't a joke to get a cheap laugh out of, like the way Ruby would try to do to get on his nerves.

"Sorry, I was lost in thought." Beryl sighs, mentally returning himself back into the present moment. "So...is the topic still about the White Room?" The words that left his tongue came out as awkward, but he hoped they wouldn't have noticed, or at least perceived it as him coming off sensitive with the topic like a lot of people are right now.

"Yeah," Jun nodded. "We wanna hear your thoughts on it. Since you never really said anything yet, even back at the group chat."

"My thoughts?"

"Yep. I mean, you're just like us. Bystanders in the matter. Not knowing of the inner works of it all, but it does make for an engaging conversation at the least..." Jun shrugs.

"'Engaging'? It's *horrific*..." Asahi corrects, to which Jun chose to ignore and kept his focus on Beryl.

"..."

Bystanders, huh... Beryl nearly wanted to release a sardonic chuckle due to the irony. But he felt a bit lighter with the fact that

the people around him consider him as just another bystander, as he calls it.

" Well, it's quite a topic. But in my opinion it's pretty..." For as far as he can remember. He didn't hold a strong opinion about that facility, it was just an education to him. As much as they experimented on him, he was also doing his own observations without their knowledge.

He didn't fear it. Nor hated it.

He didn't like it. He felt nothing for it.

"...Empty, I guess." He answered, but after seeing the confused looks on their faces, he decided to add on. " By that I mean...the white walls, the ceiling, even with all that's happened in that place. It's still empty in nature. I guess to put it another way; It's cryptic and haunting."

His response was accepted rather nicely, Jun nodded as if it were something thought provoking. But in reality, it was just the shortest answer Beryl could give, without arousing any suspicion that he knew more than he lets on.

" I guess when you put it like that....it does sound haunting. I mean, to do the things those kids are forced to do in a room that's full of white? Everything around them being that one color; just like an empty world. I would probably go mad in a place like that. " Takeo shares his take on it.

Beryl offers no comment.

" You know....come to think of it..." Shin finally spoke again, it seemed he was in deep thinking throughout most of the conversation, his eyes were focused on the article from last night. As if he was trying to examine every detail. " Do you guys really think....this is even *real*? "

" What're you talking about? It has to be. Look at the evidence on that page. Images and videos. It's hard to believe it isn't, no?" Asahi replied first.

" Yeah but think about it... a lot of stuff like this has happened

over the years. People make up stories about something without context, or shady stuff going on in the government, and exposing those things as if it were the holy scripted truth. A lot of those controversial stuff ended up being hoaxes, or something less than what we thought it'd be." Shin logically spoke, he was suspicious about all of this. But who could blame him? Like Jun said earlier, only demons would try and create a facility like this. It's hard to imagine a normal human to have to will for such a thing, and it's even harder to believe the government would allow this to happen.

Everyone took his words in consideration. It was possible, that it was all just some fake story to catch people's attention, or a propaganda against the opposing political parties. It's not the first time people from that field tried things like this.

" So it's possible it could be fake.....well, if that ends up being the case. Then I'm not particularly suprised. I get where Shun is coming from, I always found those fake news all so annoying when they end up as lies." Jun nonchalantly said.

" Well it'd be better if this is all just a lie to be honest." Asahi sighs. " if the White Room is actually real....then I'd lose all hope in our government."

" Heh! Just don't have hope at all. Then you'll no longer be suprised by the shit they pull." Jun grins.

Beryl turns away, secretly wishing it was a lie too.

Secretly wishing he ended up being wrong.

~~~~~

*White Room this, White Room that....*

*Why is everybody talking about it? Did I miss a trend?*

When Ruby entered the class, this is all anyone was really talking about. In hushed whispers and deeper details, but the latter she couldn't really pick up on unless she went nearer. But she managed to pick up the name; **White Room**.

She wondered if it was one of those internet creepypastas online, but she doubted the people in this class would actually be into that sort of thing. Then again, that was just her assumption. She's never really talked to anyone else here besides Minami, and Frill from yesterday ( *Does she count? She literally just asked me my profession-- oh what the hell! She definitely counts. Hehe~* )

.....

" Eh? You don't know what it is, Ruby?" Minami gasped.

" Nope." The blonde shook her head.

The two shared Ruby's table together as they ate their lunch. As expected, their female companionship grew quickly.

" Er, well..." Minami's face darkens. " It might be better if you didn't honestly..."

" Huh? Why?" Ruby curiously asked.

" Well it's kinda....graphic, ya know? It's pretty dark." She warned, seriously.

" I can handle it." Ruby says with absolute certainty.

" ... "

Minami gauged the blonde's expression carefully, before eventually relenting. Sighing as she pulled up her phone she muttered one last warning, to which Ruby affirms that she's prepared for whatever the pink haired girl was going to show her.

.....

*It wasn't what she expected at all.*

.....

*And yet, the description of such a place felt too familiar in her heart.*

.....

"....I see..."

From the perspective of someone who felt trapped in a similar sterile ' White Room', with barely any reason to continue living besides soaking in the slightest joy her hobbies could give her. She could empathize that to the children who lived purely for an experiment. Not in a demeaning way or anything, but she could share the tiniest understanding as to what they may have been feeling from the day they were born.

" It makes sense now, why you said what you said." Ruby hands the phone back to Minami.

" Are you okay?" The kind girl asked, to which Ruby nodded with a small assuring smile.

" I'm okay. It's just....my heart goes out to them. I hope that place shuts down too." She said.

Minami agrees with that sentiment, much like everyone else. And then they decided to not stay too long on the topic and opt to switch to a more comfortable one as they ate.

.....

But as they talked, Ruby's mind can't help but form an unlikely connection from what she knows now, to how Beryl has acted this morning. *Could it be that the article affected Beryl's mood? This sounds*

*completely insensitive but she never expected Beryl to hold any ounce of sympathy for those children--*

Or maybe he did care and she just misread him? Damn it! It's making her head ache. It would be so much easier to just walk up to him and ask, but like Aqua, she knows Beryl enough that he wouldn't give her a straight answer out of the bat. Hell, she's even questioning why she's so worried about how he's probably feeling when he's always been a little prick of a sibling. But then she was reminded of that small period of time, when he was at his lowest point.

*When he closed himself off from everyone else.*

*Bottling everything in.....*

*With no one to release it to, no one to seek comfort from....*

The sight of him suffering alone was something she couldn't bear. Not then. And certainly not now. *So what if she's secretly low-key just a smidge overprotective of Beryl's mental health?* She couldn't care less no matter how many people would tease her if they come to know of this, or if they tell her she's just being overly-anxious. They don't know what the triplets have been through, the haunting image they witnessed.

And besides, she's his older sister. That alone is reason enough for her to fret over the small things.

~~~~~

In another classroom filled with gossips about the recent intriguing topic that seemingly skyrocketed in trending overnight. One redhead was oblivious to it all, she sat in her seat surfing through her comments that afternoon during their short break. Smiling at the dozens of positive reviews after a long drought, it seems like people have recognized the fact that Arima has never

truly lost ' it '.

But then a certain comment caught her attention, though it was not about her. It was about someone else. That being, the boy she recruited to take on that role. The comment seemingly adored his acting, saying he did a great job in portraying the anxiety a real stalker could give you.

She stops for a moment, losing her head in the clouds.

And images of that scene flash through her head all at once, her mind picturing a certain blonde blue-eyed fellow actor of hers, a junior younger than her by a year....

How amazing it was to see him bring out the potential she spotted from that fateful day when they were kids again....

The person she prayed every day to meet again....

.....

Geez, why can't I get him out of my head!

She mentally berated herself for these buzzing feelings in her chest whenever she thinks of him. She was not such an easy girl, ya know? She holds great pride in that. Not once has she ever been swooned by the likes of a man, not even him! Whom she considers her equal.

Ding!

Her eyes returned to her phone as she saw a message from the person in question.

".....Ah?! "

In that moment, Arima Kana's heart pumped a lil' too much blood....

~~~~~

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.

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**" All this running must've made you tired, huh?"**

***Who is that?***

**" No. That's probably not it. We never get tired after all, don't we?"**

***It sounds familiar....feels like it too....and yet, uncertainty lies within.***

" But then again....running doesn't solve anything. I know that. But how come you failed to reach that answer? "

Beryl looks around, trying to find where that voice was coming from.

" You deluded yourself into denial of it. Even when the dots were so easy for you to connect-- yet you still pretended."

*What's wrong with that?* Beryl wanted to shoot back. But he couldn't bother responding with a quip, it's obvious that this must've been a dream. He'd fallen asleep sometime around the afternoon probably, it must've been due to his body giving out. It's not yet used to staying up overnight due to the strict schedule he set himself since young.

*How annoyingly sensitive.*

" I could summarize it all in quote for you, if you'd like."

*Wake up.*

" From an author named Suzanne Wood Fisher, a line from her book; The Keeper."

*Wake up.*

" You tried to leave the past a hundred miles down the road--"

*--This isn't the time to hallucinate.*

"--You tried to leave the past behind--"



*Find a way out--*

A distinct patter of footsteps approached from his south.

*"--Shake it off like dust."*

The footsteps stopped. And as Beryl turned around, a light shined brightly behind the figure's back. Blinding him for a moment, but it only took another moment for his golden eyes to adjust his vision to the sight before him.

" But do you know what's the problem when it comes to the past? I'm sure you're familiar with the book, no? "

.....

He wished this was a joke. Beryl's noticed he'd been doing that lately-- wishing, that is.

He wanted to laugh, truly, he did.

But now wasn't the time,

Not with the person he's facing.

"...Yeah, I do." Beryl finally answered back.

The person waits for his answer. Their eyes staring at him and giving him the run for his money when it came to possessing a blank countenance. The recognition was blaring in sirens.

And the irony that came along with it. God, he really wanted to laugh.

.....

" The problem with the past--"

*Beryl stares back into the old eyes of himself.*

*".....Was that it kept finding me."*

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

I'm back! And before you guys start raising your pitchforks at me--

I would just like to extend my apologies for not updating as sooner as you'd hoped. I realize that this came a few days after the promised 2 week absence (I believe) and I'd like to apologize for that.

I was trying to enjoy my break as much as I could, and while I did enjoy it. I also ran through a writer's block due to some personal issues I ran into, which then led to this slight delay. But my mind is ' mostly ' clear now, and I should be good!

Ah, and if you feel the writing is off. Pls let me know. Tho I will have to excuse it by saying that it's likely due to my mind getting rusty after somehow not thinking about this fic during my break.

But I promise that next chapter will be better! Especially now that everything is prepped up and ready for what's to come.

The past connection arc is finally set. Next chapter should give u guys some big entertainment, and hopefully i can properly bring it out with my way of writing. Ah, and I'd like to drop this major warning for what's to come in future

chapters;

At some point, the story will completely deter from Oshi no Ko's plot temporarily. And the tonal shift in the story will be huge. To put it in better perspective; *Up until that point, Kiyotaka has lived the world under Oshi no Ko's tone. So what will happen if the tone switches to that of COTE's?*

Of course it's not going to completely destroy the tone ONK has set from the beginning. But for a temporary time, it's going to seem like that. So prepare yourselves, if ur gonna drop the book cuz of it then thats okay, but for those willing to stay. Then I'll put in my best effort (fingers crossed~) Dont worry tho, I'm going to write it while also trying to maintain Oshi no Ko's theme. I'll exert all my brain power to make it as good as possible, my exact version i want to put out!

So with that...

See ya in the next one~

9. LoveNow, or Love later?

"If a person ever claims to live their life without telling a lie, their life itself is probably a lie."

- Ayanokoji Kiyotaka

~~~~~

*" --Hey, Beryl."*

*" Beryl--! "*

*" Hey! "*

Golden brown eyes began to flutter awake, shaken by the call of his friends and their attempts in moving him. Beryl blinks, processing his surroundings after he'd been abruptly taken away from that eerie space.

" Ah, he's finally up." Shin nods.

" ...Is class over?" Beryl groggily said.

" You slept through its entirety-- but yeah." Takeo, the person who'd woken up the boy, answered.

" Well it's still opening week, ya know? Nothing too important for you to worry about missing." Jun casually says.

" You were pretty deep asleep by the way. Didn't get any sleep

from last night?" Asahi asked, his tone indicating his worry.

" Yeah," Beryl stretches his limbs in his seat, while simultaneously holding back a yawn. " Pretty much."

Beryl looks around, and notices that it's indeed dismissal. With all his classmates getting up from their seats, packing their things, or discussing stuff with their friends. Not to mention the dawning sunlight shining its last radiance through the classroom windows, in an hour or so, the blue sky should slowly descend into the color of twilight.

Following everyone else, he begins to pack his things as well. And once he was set, he can hear a familiar vibration coming from his bag, he quickly opens and grabs the source. His phone.

*A message from Aqua...* Beryl decides to check it out. Though, he already had an idea as to what it could be.

*" You guys just gonna go straight home, or do you wanna hang out? "* Takeo asked his buddies.

*" Hang out where though? "* Shin inquired.

*" I'm thinking...maybe the arcade?"* He answered.

*" The arcade, huh. Well it sounds good to me."* Jun affirms.

*" I'm down."* Asahi shoots a thumbs up.

*" Got nothing to do so might as well."* Shin nods.

Takeo grins, excited. " Cool! " The boy was certainly hoping that he'd get these responses. Now, all that's left to ask is...

" Hey, Beryl. You coming with? " He asked.

" Sorry, it doesn't seem like I'll have the time." Beryl responds after sending a message back to Aqua.

~~~~~

Contact: Aqua 🧑💎

Aqua:
Hey, meet us at the usual playground.

Beryl:
Is Ruby actually ready?

Aqua:
We better hope so.

Beryl:
On my way then.

~~~~~

Placing his phone in his pocket, he turns to them. " My brother is calling for me. You guys have fun, I'll do my best to make it next time. "

" Aww, bummer. But alright. " Takeo grins widely, slapping Beryl's back. " Next time, you better be free by then! "

*Free....*

Beryl nods. And as they left the classroom, they waved him goodbye.

*Yeah, I'm hoping so too.*

~~~~~

What could it be...?

' Something important '.....He sounded so serious all of a sudden, though that's usually par for the course but....this time....

Arima Kana enters the girl's bathroom.

.....

Seriously...

What could that boy possibly want to tell me, that he has to call me over privately?

Or....

Declare his hidden feelings for me...!

Feeling her heart pounding in her chest, Kana immediately shakes away those fuzzy thoughts and focuses back on making herself look presentable for him. Though she would rather die than ever admit that to his face, but....if things go well, and he does confess..... maybe she'll find it in herself to admit it.

~~~~~

Stepping out of the girl's restroom with a nervous smile and the hopeful heart of a young maiden, she was ready to set off to the place Aqua wanted to rendezvous. She walks with a bounce to her rhythm as she wandered down from the performing arts section, and towards the main school hallway--

" Huh?"

She suddenly uttered, as her footsteps came to a halt. Her crimson eyes stopping on a familiar tall figure.

" Hm?"

*The tall figure turns their head to her direction, their eyes met.*

.....

Silence was born between them until...

.....

" Oh, hey Beryl!" Kana waved, approaching him smilingly.

" Arima-senpai...?" Beryl's tone resembled that of confusion as Arima Kana greeted him as if he was her favorite junior or something. *Though he already knew which person that position actually belongs to....*

Stopping in front of him, she then beamed up at him.

" I didn't get the chance to ask you this, but how was your first and second day of school~?" She peppily asked.

" I should be asking *you* that. Did you get brain damage during the first day? " He responded. Being weirded out by this side of Arima Kana he never thought was possible.

Adding further to his initial astonishment, Kana didn't seem to be offended as she laughed jovially at what she thought was a joke, but was actually Beryl's sincere concern for her health.

" Oh you, with your jokes~! That one got me this time." She said in between giggles.



" No, I'm serious. What happened to you." Beryl deadpans. The world felt imbalanced with this strange act of the genius actor.

" Oh," An idea suddenly pops in his head. " Is this for a role? "

" What is?" She asked.

" You being kind to me, of course." He tells her.

*Ah, yes, that would indeed make sense, wouldn't it? The real Arima-senpai would avoid me at all cost instead of greeting me because she actually hates my guts....so she must be putting up with me in preparation for a new show she's probably starring in.* He thought that to himself. He felt honored being deemed as her ultimate test of endurance when it comes to being ' kind ' to the most bastardly people out there.

" Huh? No?"

"....' No '?' " He repeats, in slight disbelief of what he's just heard. Was she telling jokes or was she being serious--

" You see, Beryl." She places a hand on her hip as she flicked her hair with a blissful look on her face. " I'm just in a good mood, is all. "

Beryl narrows his eyes at her, humming for a moment.

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And then the puzzles pieces together.

" It's because of Aqua, isn't it?" He said.

" A-Aqua?! Is he here--?" Almost immediately, her face turned into the highest shade of red possible, as she twisted her head left and right in search for his brother after merely mentioning him in conversation. " Wait, ugh! Of course he's not, he did say he'd meet me at the playground...." She immediately covered her face in embarrassment after realizing the amusing show she was putting on for the worse person in the world to see. " Gosh what am I doing...." she takes a second to peek through the binding holes of her finger to see Beryl's amused expression before completely shutting him out again.

" F-Forget what you saw!" She screeched through the cover of her palms.

" I think that'll be a little difficult to do..." Beryl answered, amused.

*Shit, why did I act like a fool in love in front of him of all people!* she fumes.

" So, my brother messaged you, huh." Beryl hums thoughtfully, " How strange. It's not a common occurrence for Aqua to contact anyone besides family, much less a girl-- of all people." He sets up a bait.

" Huh...? " Arima's looks from above her finger tips, curiosity replacing her previous emotion after she heard Beryl say that. " What are you....implying?"

" I'm saying he must be seeing you as quite the special someone if he's calling you out for anything besides business. " Beryl ruthlessly feeds her these crumbs of hope, her eyes lighting up, as she threw away all doubts and believed in his words.

" Hehe....you really think so?" She was definitely convinced now. That Aqua had called her for a special reason, along the lines of a confession, or to ask her out. Anything within the scope of ' teenage romance ', he supposes.

But unbeknownst to her, the reason was likely anything but that. She was being set up to have a meeting with Ruby, and was

withheld from knowing Ruby was going to be there waiting with him. All for the sake of negotiating a deal where Kana would agree to join and form an idol group with Ruby, since going solo isn't exactly something Miyako wants in mind for her daughter. And Aqua would agree. Releasing Ruby in a group of girls is indeed a safer option than having her go solo, besides, being surrounded by the same gender within the same age group could be therapeutic when the stress of entertainment begins to pile up. You'll have somebody to lean on in the business when your family can't.

*As for having Kana, specifically, to join the group. That would be a great scenario. Beryl thinks.*

.....

*She already knows Ruby to a certain extent, even if the two of them may not see eye to eye. That will change overtime once they're forced to work with the other, it's just the type of phenomenon present in most working environments. In any group of people, a system would eventually be created, for everyone to work out of. Most will gain the ability to set their differences aside and learn to work together, and call it a fairytale if you'd like to. But the evidence of this phenomenon resonating everywhere is everything around us, the structures of society, the many jobs that have been filled out wherein their service directly correlates to the average person's daily life. Food industries, Oil factories, Hospitals, Retail stores, and even young students are tested in this field with their group projects and such.*

*Arima Kana would certainly be an invaluable girl to have in the group. She's familiar with Ruby, and she has experience in the entertainment industry that Ruby has yet to completely grasp. She can help her grow. And perhaps the other way around.....not to mention....*

*Arima-senpai's personality may look stone-willed from the outside, but she is suprisingly fickle. She portrays herself to be a mature, willful, young actress to everyone around her. And she's all about security. But deep down, she's the complete opposite.*

*She likes to please everyone around her, no matter what the cost.*

*It'll be easy for Aqua to expose that in his favour, if Arima refuses to join-- which is likely her go-to response --he can easily persuade her otherwise. Perhaps with sweet words to get on her good side, and it's an*

added bonus that she's romantically attracted to him. Whether he knows the latter or not. He can pester her till she submits, till she can no longer refuse. That's the type of girl she is.

*Irrefutably easy.*

But such behaviour isn't a normal thing for any person to have, perhaps if I were to think deeper into that mindset. It's likely this was something that had formed during childhood, after all, she was a much different personality back in her younger days. She was difficult on set, and waltzed around like she was the big hotshot of the show, soaking in all the praise with pride--- until Aqua had stepped in that day and stunned everyone with his spot-on take as the 'creepy child' from the woods. When the scene was done, she quickly requested the director to shoot again, promising she could do better. Even going as far as to throw a tantrum.

*A child is never born prideful.*

Children are like blank canvases, and when they are born they only possess the basic instincts expected of an infant; crying, eating, and sleeping.

Everything else? Well, it's clear enough that it's up to their parents. They paint the child all they want with their ideals, pouring everything in-- their emotions, and even their dreams. And the child, as they grow, simply soaks it all in. Thus, whoever educated Arima Kana to act the way she did was likely her parent after discovering their child's talent to cry on will. And likely blinded by the success she could bring, they guided her into the person she was that day at such a young age. And that sparked the girl's need to impress everyone around her-- to show what she's got to offer. To receive everyone's praises because it makes her feel good. Like how her parents or other benefactors had showered her with it.

That's why she's insecure, choosing to hide behind a false persona of strength to protect herself. Because she knows that weakness of hers. But she can't do anything about it, she doesn't know what she can do about it. All she thinks she can do is try to hide it, to not make it obvious to anyone she gets close to. But unfortunately for her, she's fallen in love

*with Aqua, who will likely perform the necessary pressure to get her to join--*

.....

What was he **doing**?

He had arbitrarily began analyzing Kana's psyche without even meaning to. And to such a conclusive extent, all based on his understanding of her from multiple instances and even her noticeable habits. Since when was the last time he'd done this? And why didn't he notice it so he could stop himself? This....this isn't like him and yet....it's still something he's familiar with constantly doing--

" Hey, Beryl?" She waved her hand in front of him.

" Yes?" He blinked, quickly zoning out of his thoughts and providing her his attention.

" Did you just zone out on me? " She frowns, " I was calling for your attention, you know. And you had such a weird look on your face, you could seriously give anyone chills with that."

*Huh?*

Again, that same comment has been made today. Being brought to his attention first from Takeo, and now even Kana has picked up on the same thing. What face were they referring to? Was he really that out of it that he looked strange to them?

But isn't that why he tried to act like his usual self? Just now, talking to Kana, and shooting her snarky remarks like he normally would. He thought that if he did that, nobody would question his shift. Yet, just enough managed to seep out from his expression alone, no matter how stone a face he puts on to mask his true thoughts from the world. It won't matter if he felt...unsettled. And truthfully, he was. And that made it easy to read.

*That dream...*

It's affected him to the point he's barely controlling his own will, letting his mind wander into the explanation of Kana's psyche, that was unwelcome of him to do. Even if she doesn't know, he felt horrible.

" Anyway," Kana's lips bloom to a smile as she turned on her heel. " I'll be going now. " Without further much to say, she walks off with a pep to her step and humming gleefully. Looks like she's still hooked on his bait.

"....Tsk," Beryl pats his cheek, sliding his palm over his mouth before releasing a deep sigh.

And then he looks to the sky, that had gone from a blue day to an orange hue. Deciding to save further contemplation at a later time, when he's alone. He finally sets off into the same direction Kana left by, making sure to keep a distance from her as he followed her direction to the playground.

~~~~~

There he is...

As Kana approached, she noticed the stare the boy was giving her as he waited patiently. It evoked a fiery feeling within her, and fireworks exploding in her stomach as she anticipates what would be his next words. All for her.

It's time... She looks to him, with the glimmer of a hopeful maiden radiating from her eyes as she tucked a loose strand behind her ear, and spoke.

" I'm sorry to keep you waiting--"

A loud obnoxious sigh cuts her off.

" **Finally, she's here!** "

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" **Go wait till' hell freezes over.**" She quickly retracts her initial words and responded with bite.

Suddenly the illusion Kana was fooled to thinking had begun crashing down within a moment's notice, all her hopes, her dreams, the butterflies in her stomach, the thumping of her heart-- all for naught!

Suddenly, Aqua's eyes widened a bit, he seemed to be focus on something--

" Ah, Beryl. You were almost late."

And then Kana realizes it as she slowly turns around....

" Sorry. I was caught up with something." He said, his eyes slowly trailing down to her. And she seethes at his mere presence, she questions his audacity with spiteful intention.

You really are a brat! Kana should've known better, she was once again fooled by his tricks. No, she knew his words were a lie but

some part of her just to believe it, damn it!

" Oh, hello, Arima-senpai. You don't look too happy to see me." Beryl blandly says, though she could see the mocking intent from his eyes.

" Tch." she moves her attention from him, and to Ruby. She can't give him what he's probably desiring; a reason to tease her. So let's just get this over with.

Placing a hand on her hip, she asks Ruby directly. " So? Judging by how the three of you have gathered here. I must've been called for a pretty important reason, I'm guessing."

" *Just not something you expected, right?* " Beryl teasingly adds in the background, to which Kana ignores.

" Hm? Do you know something, Beryl?" Aqua asks, curiously.

" Anyways, make it quick!" Kana was quick to intervene, her tone going a pitch higher, sounding defensive which only caused the opposite effect of Aqua's curiosity growing bigger. But he leaves it be. After all, they were here for a more important reason.

" Well, although I was the one who called you here. It's actually Ruby who wants to talk to you." Aqua nudges his sister forward, and she looks at him with anxiety for a moment, but then turns to face Kana anyhow.

So I really got psyched up for nothing, Kana sighs disappointedly.

.....

" Well, what is it? Make it quick, I'm busy myself, so you've got 20 seconds." Kana nonchalantly says with a leg crossed over the other as she sat loosely on the bench, and her eyes focused rather boringly on the phone screen.

" Talk about being blunt..." Ruby muttered, before glancing at Aqua.

He gives her a look saying ' Don't back out now '. And she sighs to

herself before slowly approaching Kana with confidence. She knew, that this was an important step for her to take, and her pride shouldn't get in the way of it. She has to put it aside, at least for now.

Beryl watches this scene unfold with interest.

" Arima Kana-san. "

-san...? Kana notes the suprising application of an honorific to her name, from Ruby's mouth. She looks up from her phone and to the blonde. Curious of this sudden change.

" Would you be an idol together with me?" Ruby asked with vigor.

"...."

For a while, Kana looked at her blankly. Her mind zoned out for a few seconds, till' the request finally hits her in the noggin, to which then she snaps out of that trance-like state and turns her other cheek.

" An ' Idol '? Where is this coming from?" Kana questioned, it was made clear to her the obvious fact that Ruby intends to become an idol. She's heard the girl state it plenty of times, and the fact she's in the performing arts department. That alone says it all how serious she is with her dream.

But then to approach her with....*this*.

What in the world sprouted such an idea in her mind?

" You see, Strawberry Productions on putting together an idol group. " Ruby answers, her fingers entangling themselves with the other as she fiddled, " And we're looking for members.....and then Aqua mentioned you weren't exactly too ' busy ' nowadays so I was hoping--"

--What does he mean by not ' busy ' ?

"--to scout you for the group..."

Huh?

.....

"....Hey, are you serious?" Kana asked her, earnestly.

Ruby nods. " I am serious, and this is important to me." She said with urgency.

"...."

.....

" Give me time to think about it." Kana gently tells her.

But...the answer already formed in her head.

And it was a **no**.

But in her defense, the answer didn't just come abruptly. No. As soon as Ruby's request was registered, her mind had already begun thinking. In a moment, she'd already contemplated over the pros and cons of saying ' yes ', and was sure to take in account of every possible variable this gamble consisted of.

.....

As Beryl watched deeply, he peered into the could-be thought process of Arima's mind at the moment.

Without a doubt, a huge part of Arima Kana's decision making process was her huge attachment to acting. It's all she's ever known, ever practiced, and it is her life's work-- one could even say. For her to abandon it, might mean permanently closing off her acting career for good. If she becomes an idol, she'll only ever be known as one from thereafter. She'll likely lose out on jobs reserved for young actors simply because of the stressful scheduling conflict that would come to pass, and her main work will revolve around idol gigs where change is too apparent, with old generations giving way for the new, in each passing year.

By the time she hits 30, she'll be out completely.

And if she doesn't find success being an idol, she will have lost both jobs irreversibly.

And so, it's perfectly reasonable for her to prioritize her own image as an entertainer. Beryl understands the inner turmoil she must be going through, and he could guess even the smallest part of her sympathized with Ruby's dream to some extent. And perhaps from the perspective of an experienced entertainer such as herself, she's also realized something else...

.....

But this Hoshino Ruby.....

Kana's eyes take in her figure, as she felt that familiar aura from back then.

There was something about her that strangely reminded Kana of the genius idol Ai.

Was it her confidence?

The pretty face?

The aura?

Kana couldn't tell. She could never figure out what it is about Ai specifically that made her so special to the world. What exactly was the core of the genius idol Ai that shaped and helped radiated her to shine the way she did? Even now, she couldn't seem to figure it out.

She's only ever worked with the girl back at that short film. But even then, Kana was perplexed as to how Ai completely dominated the scene, despite having little to no prior acting experience besides that previous cheesy cameo she did for that drama show from earlier.

Even at such a young age, Kana quickly realized that she was the real deal-- she possessed a talent that just grabbed the viewer's attention, effortlessly. It was only natural that she became a huge success.

And now Ruby, who's strangely giving off that same feeling. The radiance, not so much, but it's so....*there*. You can feel it, you can envision it as to what it could become.

My keen nose as an entertainer....

Senses the potential in this girl, Kana truly believes.

But...the circumstances surrounding her are uneasy. Take into consideration the state of Ruby's agency for example, Strawberry Productions. A once famous trademark that housed the aforementioned idol, it's not far-fetched to say that ever since her tragic passing, the business disappeared and rarely do people ever talk about the agency anymore unless it's followed by a comment

about Ai. After losing their biggest star, all hope of revival was lost. Not to mention the agency was never really a major one from the beginning too...

To join Ruby's group....such a bizarre thing to even think about. Kana finds it questionable if her cuteness could truly grant her the desired success of an idol to begin with.

Right. This entire situation would be a gamble to take on.

And unfortunately for Ruby,

Arima Kana is not foolish enough to take on a reckless gamble like this.

" I'm sorry, but--"

Unfortunately for you though... Beryl eyes Aqua's figure on the move.

" I beg you, Arima Kana."

Kana's breath hitched when she saw the way Aqua knelt on one knee, in front of her. Staring at her with such an intensity that it made her throat dry.

--Doesn't seem like we'll take no for an answer, senpai. Beryl hums.

" Please be an idol with my sister." Aqua requested, with complete seriousness.

Kana gulps, feeling her strong resolve ever so tremble at his

intensifying stare. Her back leans further into the bench as she shakily replies,

" B-But, I'm not even cute enough to--"

" No, you are cute." Aqua interrupts, causing her face to turn even redder than it was earlier as he continues, " I wouldn't just ask you to be an idol on a whim. You're far cuter than any run-of-the-mill idols out there. I'm sure."

Ruby shoots Beryl a glance saying ' Will this work?! ' out of sheer desperation after clearly hearing Kana's near-rejection before Aqua stepped in.

Beryl nods, giving a thumbs up. Reassuring her that everything is definitely going swell.

It was just as he thought....

" I feel that my precious sister will be safer in your capable hands, Arima Kana." Aqua says.

Aqua will apply the necessary pressure...

" But..!"

" I beg you again, please become an idol."

" T-This...y-you can't just--!"

" Please."

" I-I'm saying no!"

Until eventually...

" I'm placing my trust in you and requesting you to do this." Aqua

ruthlessly continues.

Kana squirmed in her seat as she shook her head ' no ' vehemently.

She'll--

" No matter how many times you ask, it's not happening!"

" I will never do it!"

.

.

.

--.....break.

~~~~~

" Intellectually, I knew this was a bad decision!" Kana cried out, clutching the strands of her hair in full despair. " Why am I always like this?! "

" Let's give it our all, senpai! " Ruby cheers, smilingly.

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" So, how did you manage that?" Miyako asked Aqua, gesturing to the new redhead who signed into their agency just now.

" He read her like a book." Beryl answered for him, " She's suprisingly an empathetic girl, and she's susceptible to pushiness. "

Aqua nods,

" Based on her personality, I judged that tearfully pleading and twisting for her sympathy would be effective, and sure enough, it was." Aqua added.

Miyako sighs. " The both of you...."

While tucking in the files neatly into the envelope, she comments. " If the two of you continue to act like this, then surely, karma will find its way to you someday. It'd do well for you to consider that."

Aqua shrugs her off. He believes that he did not do anything particularly wrong to try and get Kana on their side. If she truly did not wish to take part, then she would've showed it more willfully against the pressure. Besides being empathetic, there had to be another reason she relented to their request in the end. And it's not like he lied to her about being cute either.

.....



*Karma, huh....* Beryl repeats in his head, as he recalls the recent thorn on his side.

~~~~~

" The problem with the past--"

"--Was that it kept finding me."

~~~~~

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" Is he alright? " Kana raised a brow to Ruby, her finger pointing towards Beryl who seemed lost in his own little world.

" Ah, well...." The truth is, Ruby didn't know herself.

" Been noticing he's sporting a more....gloomier look." Kana's voice was laced with a bit of concern, though her expression didn't show much else but indifference. " And when I encountered him as I left the school, he was spacing out. It annoyed me. Did he get his heart broken or something? "

*Did yours?* Ruby holds back the thought with a smile. Any other day, she would've gladly fired that one out. But her concern for Beryl's state of mind has been bothering her the whole day somewhat, though she kept it in its own little space so as not to deter her prime focus from convincing Kana to join Strawberry Productions and debut as an idol alongside her.

But now that even Kana of all people had brought it up...

" *That's what I've been wondering too...*" Ruby's comment came out as a whisper,

" Hm? " Kana turned to her in question, it seems she didn't pick up on that.

Ruby waves her hands dismissively while shaking her head. " No, it's nothing. I've noticed it too but I'm guessing he just woke up on the wrong side of bed today, you know? And Beryl's not the type to get into relationships so I doubt he'd got his heart broken or anything-- *though I'd be suprised if he had one to begin with.*" She jokes.

" Heh!" That seemed to do the trick, as Kana let out an amused snort. Nodding in agreement, she says. " That's true. Only a girl who could match his brattiness, let alone tolerate it. Could ever have the privilege of even *dreaming* in getting together with that guy. He's a looker but I honestly can't imagine him being in a relationship. "

Ruby nods along, sharing the same sentiment. She's stated to Beryl many times that he was a definite walking red flag, with the way he already abuses his sister-- it's not hard to imagine the same type of treatment his theoretical " girlfriend " would have to endure. Holding a deep understanding of her little brother, she's absolutely confident that while he's not completely incapable of pulling women, he was certainly questionable in having the ability to keep them for long till' they realize how casually cruel he can be at the

most unwarranted of times. ( And if a girl can't handle that, then they're best to stay away from him. )

That is to say...

It's not like he didn't have his good points either. Much to her bewilderment, Ruby can reluctantly agree with how girls can be attracted to a guy like him at first sight. But they've yet to even scratch the surface considering girls usually found Beryl attractive from his looks alone. If they figured out that Beryl was a neat individual, who could cook, and was surprisingly competent in almost everything thrown at him. They'd be ensnared by his charm completely. ( So he's a red flag disguising himself as a green flag, Ruby adds. )

Though, now that she thinks about it a little more...

He's never really expressed much interest in that subject, has he? Back in middle school she could recall the line of girls that had confessed to him....all of which were promptly rejected. It confused her, so during a mundane weekend day she decided to ask him about that. She was met with a nonchalant response such as ' I don't plan to date anytime soon ' which was respectable, but it did kinda irk her even back then.

After all, deep down, she thinks she's holding him back. She's not dense enough to not see that Beryl is hyper-focused on keeping the promise they made when they were kids, but she never agreed with it to the point where he'd choose to abandon his own potential interests in favor of serving hers. It just isn't right. Even if a promise is a promise, she still couldn't help but feel guilty about it. Would he really be fine with a future like being her secretary? No doubt, she would be happy to have her family by her side, but it would be meaningless if he doesn't find real happiness in that like she does.

And that's reminding of the fact that something was clouding Beryl's mind now. Something that's turning him different, or is it that he's reverting to something else...? Something that's stalling the happiness she wants for him.

## *The **White Room**...*

The thought passed by during lunch time, and as far-fetched as this might be to even think; *Could it be possible that this White Room had some connection to his past life...?*

For such a thought to even form in her head, Ruby wanted to laugh aloud. That couldn't possibly be it, right? Besides, it's just....a nonsensical theory she formed on her own. She doesn't really have any substantial evidence to entertain that theory any more so than she already has. So the problem has to be something else...

.....

" ' Former genius child actor '. Hah, a that title means nothing, " Kana sighs, exasperated before plopping onto the couch. " Now I'm about to become a ' former genius child actor idol '. Well, in any case, I needed to expand my horizons, no?" She muttered.

" You're desperate to convince yourself, huh? " Ruby comments.

Kana brushes that comment off, instead trying to raise her head and look off with positivity.

" But by being in the same agency as Aqua means more opportunities for us to work together. Hm, that doesn't sound too bad I'd say."

*--The person in question had left the room seconds prior--*

" And perhaps he may have some techniques I can steal. Yes, this is a lot more beneficial once I had widened the scope." Kana said, nodding to herself. Ruby just smiles and lets her be, letting her hope however she wants.

" You think so?" Ruby wondered if that really was her true intentions and not just copium--

" Hey, speaking of which," Kana sits up straight and makes eye contact with the girl. " Does Aqua have his next job lined up?" She asked.

Immediately, Ruby lets out a deep miserable sigh while shutting her eyes with an empty smile.

" Well...he does, but..."

" What's with the sour face?" Kana raised a brow.

" Arima-senpai, you'd be wearing a pretty sour face too if you come to know of it." Beryl suddenly enters their conversation, his appearance snapped Ruby out of her cringe mental image of the show her brother's in, and stares at Beryl in surprise.

*He's snapped out of it?* Ruby asks, though, it's something she'd like to think for herself.

Kana turns to Beryl with a questioning gaze. " What is it?" She demanded to know.

Beryl grins.

And upon seeing that grin, Kana realized too late that she shouldn't have asked.

.....

" What?! " Her eyes widened upon seeing the laptop screen.

*" Aqua's in a dating show?! "*

~~~~~

The curtain rises on a new season...

A new season of love will bloom...

The six people who will be on this season are....

A cute girl walks in the room and was greeted by four other contestants who were already seated by the classroom table.

She smiles. "I'm Yuki Sumi. A first year in high school."

.....

"She has an amazing figure!" Ruby gasps.

"Well, as expected for a young model. She is pretty." Kana hums.

"....." Beryl watches in silence.

"Hey," Ruby pokes him from his side. "You comment too!"

"Seriously...?" He shoots her a bored look, but she looked damn serious about it indeed with that poutiness of seriousness on her face.

He sighs before deciding to humor her, to take his mind off things.

"Yeah, she's....alright." He lets out his comment, though he's had plenty more back to when he met Sumi Yuki at the set. And everyone else too.

.....

"I'm Noboyuki Kumano. Dancing is my specialty!"

.....

"...." Both Kana and Ruby seem to have nothing to comment.

I guess silence speaks for itself... Beryl interprets. Though since Ruby pestered for him to comment when he didn't see a need to....

" Hey, what do you think of him?" Instead of a tiny nudge, he shoved Ruby hard enough to the point she toppled over to Kana.

" Hey!" The both of them glare at him.

Beryl grins without needing to look back at them.

.....

" I'm Kurokawa Akane, a 2nd-year high school student and an actress."

.....

" That girl...!" Kana's tone suddenly shifted to a higher pitch upon recognizing her.

Beryl and Ruby turn to her.

" Someone you know? " Ruby asked.

" Well," Kana looks away, awkwardly scratching her cheek. " I guess so..." She answered vaguely.

Hoh? Beryl bookmarks that reaction as a point of interest he's sure will be relevant in the future.

.....

***" I'm Mem-cho, a third year high schooler. I stream on youtube!
" A girl with short blonde hair introduces before doing a cute pose.
" Nice to meet you~ "***

.....

" They have those types on the show too, huh?" Kana remarks with an interesting tone.

" Oh my gosh! She's so cute!" Ruby fawns over her.

" Yeah, she is." Beryl comments, though that didn't mean much from him judging by his nonchalant tone.

He was never a fan of those types anyway when it came to a romantic sense...

.....

" I'm Morimoto Kengo. I'm in a band." A boy with silver hair introduced himself next, his most noticeable aesthetic being the piercings on his ears.

.....

He's the coolest of the five shown, mostly keeping to himself. And despite the impression of a calm person he gives everyone during the first meeting, lies a burning passion for music, Beryl recounts what he thought of him.

" Ooo~ He looks cool!" Ruby gives her sigil of approval.

" Music, huh..." Kana suspiciously mumbles.

" Is something wrong, senpai?" Beryl calls her out on it.

" W-what? No! It's nothing..." Kana seems to be flustered, wondering how Beryl even caught that.

Like before, he mentally bookmarks that suspicious mumble along with her earlier reaction.

" But anyways," Kana switches back the topic, crossing her arms and nodding in understanding. " From what I understood, this is a show wherein the participants are all entertainers, and are given various activities on the weekends to expand their bonds with each other. And in the end they either couple up or don't. I wonder who's going to be the last one--"

.....

.....

" HUH? WHO THE HELL IS THAT?! "

Both Kana and Ruby exclaim in horrified glances.

" Who is this? That's not my big brother. Where's that gloomy aura vibe he always carries? Who is this imposter!"

" He's taking putting on a character too far! What in the hell is that, Aqua!"

.....

" Aww, you're so handsome! I really admire actors." Mem-cho sways her head cutely.

.....

Ruby narrows her eyes. " Ah, not good. My brother is awfully critical about these type of cutesy girls. No way she has a chance

with him--"

.....

" You're cute yourself, Mem-cho. I'm feeling kinda bashful now, haha!" Aqua says, sheepishly.

.....

" What's his deal?! He only ever called me cute when he was trying to get me to join you!" Kana complains bitterly.

" He must be in a good mood surrounded by all those girls. I'll give him a talking-to when he gets home." Ruby says in suspicion, and then she sighs. " So in the end, he's just another carnivorous male. "

" Tch," Kana begins to scoff. " Look at how he acts the second he finds a female who's an easy target. "

" Like you?" Beryl remarks.

" Shut up! "

Miyako pauses her work and turns to the two other females in the room. " Girls, you do realize this is a show for public consumption, right? Calm down. It's important for Aqua to act the way he did."

" Right," Beryl nods. " If he doesn't act like that. The show won't work. He has to actively try to introduce himself as a viable candidate for romance, even if he doesn't want to." *And he really doesn't want to*, Beryl refrains to add.

" I get that, alright? " Kana stubbornly pouts. " But isn't this a show where these people really profess their feelings and become a couple at the end? "

" That's right. Even if it's for form's sake, they'll probably stick to that storyline." Beryl shrugs.

" Right. And if it all goes well...they do stuff like kissing and

hugging, right?" Kana oddly asked.

" Guess so." Beryl answers.

"....Hn." Kana pulls her knees up on the couch and rests her head there. " *Why did he even agree to a show like this...*"

Because there are important details that benefits him. And me as well. Beryl thinks as he vividly recalls the day after he was proposed to join but initially rejected, but then the conversation with Ruby came and....

It's like hitting two birds with one stone. With how his two promises coincide.

" Beryl, you've joined the camera crew of the show, right?" Miyako suddenly asked.

" Yeah. Though I didn't get to do much yet. I only helped a bit with the promotional video we just watched, the actual episode filming would begin this coming weekend--"

" Huh? Wait, Beryl." Ruby's eyes nearly bulged out of their eye sockets. " You joined?!"

" Eh...? I didn't think you were going to continue with camera work all of a sudden. Though you did do a good job and everything with the final episode of *Sweet Today...*" Kana curiously asks. " Did Aqua ask you? "

" Unfortunately so."

" Wait, since when? Why haven't you told me of this!" Ruby exclaimed in excitement, rather than confusion. Which ironically in turn, confused Beryl a bit.

" Well, you didn't ask. And I thought Aqua would've mentioned to you earlier so..."

" Lil bro, this is great!" Ruby suddenly stands up and tugs on Beryl's arm. " This means you've got the inside scoop of how everything goes in the show, don't you? How is everyone like." She asked, attentively. Deep down she was giddy that this potentially meant Beryl had a dream of his own; to become a camera man for filming studios.

" I signed a contract, so I can't really say much...." Beryl reveals.

" But I've always been curious about how reality tv shows work. Like, do the people in it really act the same way they do when they're outside of it? " Ruby asked.

" That's only true on a few cases. More often they put on a character to rake in the views like what Aqua is doing." Kana answers in Beryl's place. " Annoying as that is, though..." She adds.

" Really? "

She really is bitter about it, huh... Beryl muses. But she isn't wrong...

Indeed, everyone is trying to put on some sort of character to grab the viewer's interest. And this upcoming weekend's filming is going to showcase the sneaky ideas everyone must've thought of after the promotional video's release to try and attract attention to the show. But Beryl recalls that fateful first day on the set, when he got to meet the crew, and the participants.

And his first impressions of them were quite decent. It was honestly to be expected for a group of teenagers within similar age gaps.

" H-Huh...?"

Suddenly, a loud gasp was emitted from the only adult in the room, which caught the attention of the three teenagers as they turned to her with concern. Her eyes seemed frozen at the new notification she'd received from her screen.

" Miyako-san? Is everything alright?"

" Ruby, could you turn on the TV? " Miyako spoke seriously all of a sudden, causing a rigid feeling to circulate through the young blonde's skin.

" O-Oh, sure! Wait, where's the--"

A sounding click interrupts Ruby's flustered state as the office TV box turned on and radiated its vibrant images. She soon came to the realization that it was Beryl who turned it on.

What's going on...? Kana felt like the atmosphere had suddenly shifted, and it didn't feel good at all.

" NIPPON News Station has brought to you the latest breaking news regarding the case of political candidate Naoe Jinnosuke head of the Naoe faction, and his accused production of a very horrid project known as Project: White Room."

Ruby goes silent as she stares at the screen. *This is what everyone's been talking about at school*, she thinks. But moreover...

She glances at Beryl's empty expression at the screen.

Kana's eyes widened at the information, this was her first time hearing it.

Miyako concentrates on the screen with a near-pitiful expression for what's to come.

The channel gave a rundown for this certain topic that had sprouted overnight to several stations and tabloids around the country. Its attention being brought to the huge social media had only made the urgency of the situation go further, and it was certainly able to plant the seeds of backlash at the government and the accused politician within that branch. But now it seems the dreaded awaited updates of the situation had arrived....

" While the original article that had gone viral-- headed by

Detective Sagami Yuki --has posted some graphic evidence of this Project White Room, depicting the overexerted children and the punishments and expectations weighing upon them. She has procured even more evidence to support her claims of this horrible institution. Without further ado, we would like to remind everyone watching that in the next following seconds the station will showcase the evidence given at this very moment, and a heavy warning to all of you for its graphic content in it. The videos will show several more " lab tests " that had been done on these children, their ages within the 8 - 10..."

~~~~~

*-- Is everything going to plan over there, Yuki? --*

" Yes." The newly turned 29 year old responded as her amethyst eyes stare at the TV screen with a look of satisfaction.

Sagami Yuki sat in the comforts of her bed in her apartment, which gazed down the beautiful city lights of Tokyo. One of her legs crossed over the other as she sat in her recliner chair, staring at the News Channel as it repeated her new testimonies regarding the White Room, and about the new gritty evidence she submitted. On one hand, she held a special burner phone gifted by the person from the other end of the call. She continues to speak,

" By tomorrow, I'm expecting the press to want to reach out to the accused man in question. It'll be broadcasted without a doubt, and soon the news will reach international for everyone to see. It's already done that on social media, but it's going to widen even more. Maybe it'll even reach wherever you are, **Shiro.**"

*-- Well, sad to say. But I don't own any cable here, remember? --*

Following the response, was a smooth chuckle by a new identity named ' Shiro '.

" Over the course of the week or two, I'll release the evidence I've

procured over the past decade bit-by-bit. In order to have that man and his dream slowly crumble with each new release, a slow death. Like he'd nearly given you and me. A slow death, that he'd already given to plenty." She says without further emotion besides the bellowing anger in her heart.

*-- I still sense that anger in your tone, Yuki.... --*

*-- Haven't I told you to manage that? Don't act too cocky, this is still the White Room you're trying to destroy here. They might pull the rug under you, perhaps hurt the people you've developed bonds with --*

" They won't win. Not even close." Yuki says with certainty. " Even if they do, I won't really care. No matter what tricks they pull, I have already anticipated. No matter how many lives they take, my determination will never diminish. Their end is inevitable and I'll make sure **he** realizes it."

*-- I still suggest you consider ending this quick. Don't prolong the war longer than it has to. --*

"....Hm, "

" At first, I thought it'd be a war. But..."

" Now I'm starting to think this is a simple execution." *A trial long awaited.*

*A verdict justice has sought.*

*-- Yuki... --*

" What they've done to everyone. To you. To me. And what they put Kiyotaka through....I..."

" I can never forgive that."

" Shiro, I asked you this before; But don't you feel angry too? Don't you think that I'm right in deciding to make them suffer slowly and painfully like they did to us? "

-- .... --

Yuki eagerly await for his response. As someone from the same generation-- no, he wasn't just a normal student of the 4th generation. Shiro was someone regarded as the second best, and to Kiyotaka no less. When every student had dropped down to only a mere two, it was the both of them. They battled an accumulated count of hundreds, and he's held the record of beating Kiyotaka the most times until the latter improved tremendously and soon Shiro's losses surpassed Kiyotaka's in due time.

And unlike everyone else...

Shiro, out of his own free will, left the White Room. To last that long and to keep his sanity in the end, it was something amazing to Yuki and something she respects.

***--....My point still stands, Yuki. You need to end it. --***

Though, this has become one of their many disagreements.

" I will. Trust me, I will."

***-- ...Don't let your anger cloud your judgement. That's all I want to say. --***

***-- Remember to be content in both heart and mind. Maintain this balance. Don't let one overpower the other. --***



" I know. I haven't forgotten what you taught me...but..." She sighs. " Let me do this. I need to do this. You won't understand, and I don't expect you to. But.... I swear things won't swerve out of my control. The White Room will die, as I promised."

*-- .....I guess I can't do anything from my end either way. Whether that is to intervene or to try and convince you, you've always been headstrong in your beliefs. I'll leave it to you. --*

Yuki nods with a hum.

*-- I'll talk to you another time, Yuki. Hopefully when you've accomplished your desire. --*

After Yuki mutters her goodbye, the call ends. Immediately, the burner phone shuts down completely, preventing any digital trace from surfing through the waves people from the government could detect. It was already hard enough considering the burner phone didn't originate from Japan, but rather from where Shiro lives-- a faraway country. She never would've thought she'd meet him then, considering how difficult it was to locate exactly where he was and to get in touch with him. Like her, he's taken multiple aliases over the years to hide his identity.

But unlike her, he holds no resentment for the White Room.

He holds no anger.

Despite being the only individual left alive and sane enough from the 4th generation, it's funny how he could never truly sympathize with her feelings.

Or maybe he was just that good at hiding his emotions unlike her.

" Well, it no longer matters." Yuki grabs the next folder she plans to send over tonight to the station, and to be broadcasted tomorrow.

*Just a little more.....*

*A little more...to satiate these feelings.*

*Kiyotaka....wherever you are.....I hope you're watching. Whether that be from heaven or hell.*

Shiro was right. She was angry. So angry. Gone was the Yuki that Shiro once knew.

All that's left was this revenge-seeking individual.

And after spending so many years of figuring out how to get to this point, to procure all the pieces, all the weapons she will use to destroy this facility and reveal the truth to the world. Her emotions can't help but peak.

But as she said....

Angry or not...

Hateful or not....

The result will be the same; long awaited retribution.

And then out of nowhere, her phone begins ringing. And upon answering it, and hearing the voice from the other end of the line. Her eyes widened, she never would've thought that this person would contact her again....

~~~~~

" We're off to school, Mama."

The morning routine goes as usual, with Ruby bidding goodbye to the family picture as she leaves the house with her brothers.

" We'd better hurry," Aqua says, " We're going to miss the bus if we take too long."

" Yes, yes. We'll hurry. Jeez..." Ruby answered back.

The news of last night still weighed heavily in her mind...

And it did so in Aqua's as well, when he entered the room again a few minutes when it had begun broadcasting.

Beryl silently contemplated, it's all he'd been doing since the broadcast. Coming to the conclusion that Yuki was definitely going to reveal all the major points day by day, and solidifying his theory of her actually holding the evidence needed to threaten the White Room but choosing to prolong it for whatever reason. It's becoming clear.

It pricked at his skin, he could feel the presence of his past self tailing him like a ghost. Becoming more corporeal the more he tries to avoid it.

This really is troubleso--

Beryl suddenly halts, as well as his thoughts.

This feeling... His eyes widened a bit, the feeling of being **watched** loomed over him. It wasn't just one pair, but several others. He tries to pinpoint where exactly it's coming from but it's difficult considering they were now on the public space with the route leading to the bus station. Several working adults were all going to their jobs, just like how there were also students going to school.

Ruby and Aqua were quick to notice the sudden pause of his footsteps, they both turn to him.

" Hold on, I think I might've stepped on poop." Beryl blandly says as he lifts his foot and twists to look from the side.

Ruby's face scrunches in disgust, " Ew! Are you serious? "

" I don't see any poop though..." Aqua remarks, eyeing closely the path they walked on.

" Ah, false alarm. " Beryl places his shoe back down, and looks to his siblings. " I just stepped on a bug."

" A bug?! " Ruby seemed to remain horrified.

Beryl nods, scraping his shoe against the sidewalk, and there was indeed what looked to be remnants of a bug he'd fortunately stepped on to make this excuse. After successfully scraping it off the bottom of his shoe without earning suspicion from his siblings and from those that were watching him, he says.

" Sorry about that. Let's go." He allows them to resume.

And so they did. This time, without any further stops.

Though....

Beryl narrowed his eyes, as his hand clenched tightly on the strap of his sling.

This all meant.....he really had no choice.

~~~~~

*Over the course of a few days...*

*As promised, new details had popped up on a daily basis,*

*Broadcasted in every channel for everyone to see. And as expected, it had reached the attention of the entire world.*

*The truth behind the Talented Persons Nurturing Program...*

*The real project that was the White Room.*

.....

***" Mr. Naoe, the new evidence that has been shown over the past few days has been increasingly brushing away all your counter responses. The public of Japan doesn't seem any more convinced that you and your faction are truly innocent of this horrid crime you've conducted. The press has already received news that a proper trial is to be conducted on you and your close subordinates who have produced the program, may I get your response on that? "***

***" I-I..."***

.....

*Several more videos containing the brutal training the children were put through,*

*The mental breakdowns,*

*And even live deaths recorded by the training observation videos.*

*The public has rallied against the japanese government, both on the streets, and online. To push through the trial faster and finally convict these horrible people for their crimes.*

.....

*This entire event was the big talk of almost all of the schools. Yoto high, was no exception.*

*Almost every student had something to say with each new update, the gossips continue, with pity steadily growing at its base.*

.....

*And finally....*

*That friday evening...*

**" My name is Sagami Yuki. "**

The detective responsible for making waves across the world with the story she's wanted to tell for the past decade...

Everything she's worked up to day and night...

**" Everything I've shown you thus far. The truth of Naoe Jinnosuke and his subordinates, the facility he allowed to be conducted under his orders. I don't feel the need to mention this, but just in case I will once again say that it's all, without a doubt, real."**

*Her interview was broadcasted live that evening, to millions in the country.....*

*And to billions worldwide.....*

**" I, too, am a product of the facility. My earliest memories as a child were that of the white walls, like everyone else before and after me that'd been born there. But what separated me and a number of people was that our generation contained the most brutal curriculum in modern times' as far as I know."**

*She spoke with strong emotion that needed to be heeded....*

**" The number of students in my generation that had diminished overtime was so rapid, that any other generation could not compare. Plenty of kids I knew had lost their minds and were taken out to be cared for by an institution funded by the same man, while others have passed away due to exhaustion. Fortunately enough, I was of the latter batch. But truthfully, nothing involved in what I'm going to say next contains any fortune whatsoever..."**

**" Here with me, is a list of every recorded individual in every generation the White Room had facilitated. Their names, and all of their records from beginning to end. Their statuses, dates of birth, and families they used to belong to. "**

*The screen switches to the images of the listed names and backgrounds....*

**" The government trial will be conducted soon. And my evidence will certainly be validated....but before any of that, I would like to highlight a specific individual whom I think had it the worst. Someone who stood on the high pedestal from my generation, the ' Masterpiece ' of the White Room, they titled him."**

*The image of a boy's face was shown on the screen. A boy with brown hair who wore a blank expression, his golden brown eyes containing no light in them, as if they were soulless. Everyone watching the channel shivered under that disturbing gaze...*

*But Ruby and Aqua....*

*They felt an especially morbid sensation of familiarity from the screen....*

*" Why does it feel...familiar...?" Ruby shuddered. That gaze...*

*"...Could it be...?" Aqua mumbled, he's thought of it before but...if it really goes the way he thought it will then--*

**" He aced each test by his latest years. But it never came easy. Like everyone else, he'd shown tiny results at the start that had the observers overlook him. And overtime, those results grew bigger to the point where it affected our curriculum as a whole. Everything, by then, was made to suit his difficulty."**

**" He was branded as the milestone for the white room. The exact masterpiece of a product they wanted to produce, but the one defect they placed on him were the riddance of his human emotions. The White Room took away the chance for this boy to even grown a semblance of humanity. "**

**"...And in the end, eventually, he was left alone. The lone survivor of the fourth generation, at least at the time that's what had been thought. Until by the age of 14 he had fallen to the ground, due to several complications."**

The screen shows the final file made on the boy.



Along with that...was his name...

*" The White Room, although under Naoe. It was directed by his closest subordinate, Ayanokouji Atsoumi. And through his sheer cruelty and determination to seek out the trust of his sponsors.... he had bore a child of his own that is this boy, Ayanokoji Kiyotaka. And enrolled him to the Fourth Generation."*

Ruby and Aqua's eyes widened.

" Kiyo...taka...?" that name...

Suddenly a memory resurges...

Back when they were still kids.

.....

*" Beryl what was that about? " Ruby had once asked...*

*" It's nothing. And could you please not call me that? It's embarrassing. " He responded.*

*" But how else do you want us to call you? Some nickname based on Goldenberyl? It wouldn't suit to your taste anyhow." Aqua had also asked.*

*And that's when he answered,*

*" Kiyotaka."*

.....

' Kiyotaka ', the same name as the boy that was shown on the screen.

The same eyes....but...

" A-Aqua....do you think...?" She wanted to ask if she was wrong, that it was all just a coincidence but...

" .... "

.....

*" Kiyotaka? Is that..." Aqua trailed off.*

*" Yes, it's my real name-- or well, the name I was given in the past. "*

.....

Aqua remembers the observations he's had of him in the past...

.....

*" I understand where you're coming from. I think. Or maybe I'm being presumptuous here but let's assume your background is what I think it is. "*

*" And what might that be?"*

Aqua explains.

*" That you're a stranger to any type of affection. Maybe it stems from a terrible household?"*

.....

*'...but the one defect they placed on him were the riddance of his human emotions. The White Room took away the chance for this boy to even grown a semblance of humanity. '*

Aqua's mouth closes to a thin line, a bitter taste on his mouth as he no longer has any doubt.

As for Ruby....she clings to the denial that this was all just a

coincidence....but then... she remembers the words he said to her back when she ran away.

.....

***" Ruby, if it means anything. I can understand somewhat about what you're feeling."***

***"...Huh?"***

***" I was...a shut-in too, I guess. I know what it's like not being able to do the things you wanted in your past life. "***

.....

***Beryl....I...you.....it was worse than that....wasn't it?***

.....

***"This life is a chance for you....for me." He continues, " To do the things we couldn't do then."***

.....

At that time in her life, she was comforted by the gaze of someone who understood. But now after seeing this revelation she couldn't help but feel an extreme amount of guilt pooling in her heart.

Neither of them have said it aloud, but both of them connected the dots.

**Kiyotaka** of the White Room and **Beryl**, their younger brother....

*Are one and the same...*

And the person in question....

~~~~~

" Not only did you request for me to close the shop all of a sudden and send everyone home. But you also asked for me stay. Do you have something important to discuss, Beryl?" Tamako asked.

" I do." He was here, in the cafe.

.....

He looks to her with a serious gleam in his eyes, Tamako could feel a certain emotion from them. A not so good one, she'd describe.

" I know..." He starts. " That you can sense those people as well."

" Sense those people? What are you saying?"

" Don't pretend. It's futile, you're from the White Room, aren't you?"

""

.....

She laughs.

" A slight correction there; *Was* from the White Room." She had no reason to lie, not after Yuki's plan had finally been brought to realization within the past few days.

" I'm guessing..." She tilts her head with a sly grin. " You sensed something was off from me since the beginning? I daresay, I'm impressed. And I could say the same for you when I sensed something off from you since the beginning. "

It was only now, that Beryl finally saw the need to act on it.

Without further ado, he gets straight to the point like he always has.

" I would like you to arrange a meeting for me and Sagami Yuki."

And makes one suprising request.

"...Oh? On other days I would tease that you may have a certain crush on that girl after all...but..." Her eyes gleam in interest. " That doesn't seem to be the case now." she mutters soon after.

" I don't care what position you have in regards to the White Room. I don't have anything planned of you other than this; I need you to arrange this meeting or else." He said without emotion.

" Or else....what?" she smiles. " Don't tell me you're willing to even get physical with a lady over it--"

He closes in on her within a second, causing her to instinctively step back.

She looks up at him, her breath hitching upon seeing such a cold gaze....one that resembled a man she too detested. And to feel this from a child.....it's....

" *The answer to that would depend on the choice you make now, Tamako-san.*"

He addressed her, his next words then piercing her soul.

" So I urge you to choose wisely."

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

This chapter....went through so many tribulations to make.

First of all was my motivation slump, where i had little to no motivation to write anything for like the entire week after i uploaded the last one.

Secondly, even when i did eventually get motivation. I tend to lose it again just as quickly and wrote like 300 words before folding each day. It's not like i didn't have a plan of what to write, of course I did. It was just unrefined.

And the more i thought about my ideas the consequence it could give the fic, it just gave me a headache lmao. Doubting yourself really does give a person a migraine fr.

Lastly, I was just being distracted by plenty other things. No excuses there. But adding onto that was the countless revisions.

Yes. I revised.

So many damn times.

I cut out like 4 segments of this chapter cuz i felt it didn't pace well. In the end, i decided to use them for the next chapter. But damn i really put a lot into those segments only for me to goofily decide " Well this is shit. get this out. " :skull:

But through all that, I finally wrote the last 4k words today and finished this chapter.

I hope you enjoyed it!

Ah...

And one last major news...

I want to end this fic after I wrap up Kiyotaka's Past arc up. I already have an ending in mind. But dont take it as a "

definitive ending ", since spoiler alert: I'm ending it around Ruby's first concert, like season 1.

My reason for this is that....

My update schedule is going to be more hectic from now. In two weeks i'll be going back to school so....if i try to extend till the recent manga chapters i wont be able to make it. And thus, this will be discontinued like everything else.

But i dont want. And im sure ya'll prolly dont want that either. So i'm ending it prematurely. Dont worry, i'll build up to it properly so u can at least savor it, just dont get ur hopes up lol.

Maybe once i get thru one of those school breaks, I will continue with....i guess a " season 2 " of this fic? Tho tbh once i end it i dont necessarily wanna pick it up again until Oshi no Ko season 2 is out ( before u say anything, i already read the manga ) since i like using its images to lessen my writing load.

Hopefully u guys can understand my reasons with that. But even if season 2 comes out it's not a guarantee if i'll pick this up again so either way this ending can also serve as a proper ending for this fic.

And....im kinda in the mood to update my other fics now so....next chapter will come wayyy later probably. Sorry everyone :D

Oh! And again i hope u enjoyed it...and...

See u in the next chapter~

## 10. Siblings.

" People protect what they love. "

- *Jacques Cousteau*

~~~~~

" To think you'd actually threaten me....." Tamako leered up at him, her smile wiped off from her face.

She knew he was serious, and willing to keep to his word. Depending on her answer, huh? Offering her the illusion of a choice in the place of a threat.

" What makes you think you could beat it out of me? " She asked him, with a cold look in her eyes.

It would've intimidated the average person, after all she's seen and been through from that facility. The taste of bitterness that was left permanently on her tongue the more she remembers, the same bitterness she's trying to wash away with her little sweet cafe. Her eyes really should just scare about anyone, she was never a cold person to begin with but she does have her moments and this was one of them....however...

" What makes you think I couldn't? " He responded in an instant.

It was then that she realized that there was something more to this boy than she had suspected. His automatic response, emotionless, and straight to the point. It sent a nerve-wracking feeling into her stomach. *Just who is this...?*

"...."

"...."

Kiyo--.....no. Beryl stared at her in silence, waiting for her next move. His eyes gauged her stone-hard expression but her eyes definitely showed that uncertainty he was betting on. She was putting on a front, and in reality she was scared. It's all a matter of how she'll choose to act on that feeling, whether it be to submit to his wishes, or to fight, or even to run. Nonetheless, even if it's option two or three, he'll find a way to get what he wants.

He doesn't know how capable she is. But it's confirmed she's from the White Room, after all, she'd already confessed to that and she perfectly replicated the cold and unfeeling gazes of the instructors from back then. But his instincts told him she was a lot softer than the average.....she was more human than the rest of them.

The silence continued for a little more, but Beryl has cornered her on every other possible route besides the three stated. She could threaten to report him with footage from the CCTV, but who's to say he'd simply let that happen? He's made sure to disable those when she was acting her job as the waitress, he'd snuck into the office while his two co-workers didn't seem to notice. She could try to run but he'd catch up to her, it's clear from her figure that it's been a while since she's engaged into any physical test of sorts. Or any training to maintain that vitality. But he shouldn't underestimate her too much, especially if she does choose to end up resisting and fighting him. He'll have to be careful....but he's confident he'd win anyhow. But truthfully, he's hoping it wouldn't have to go down that way. It's an unnecessary action for her to take.

In any case, she probably sees that too. There's no point into staying silent any further. She has to make her choice.

"....Well, I doubt I'd win even if I tried." She sighs, her fist unclenching, and her gaze softening. " I'm already 35, ya know? Besides..." She smiles and winks at him. As if this was just any other day. " All I've got is this cafe and this pretty face. I think I'd like to protect both, if it's within reason."

"...."

Beryl, too, shares that same sigh. With his being of relief. The tension in his body relaxes, but he kept his guard up just in case. Nevertheless, he looks at her more calmly now.

" Of course," He tells her. " I'm glad you made the right choice, Tamako-san." *And he meant it in every word.*

~~~~~

" You really are a whole lot stranger than I thought, Beryl."

The two of them sat down, facing each other and engaging in a more comfortable tension than previous.

" As I said before, I always knew something was off about you. Though it was made wholly apparent once Yuki decided to visit the cafe.....you wouldn't stop sneaking secret glances at her."

" You noticed?"

" Of course I did. Yuki did too, she was the one who brought it up to me and from then on I couldn't stop noticing it. She thought you were a suspicious individual since your staring was far from normal, now me personally, I would've thought you had developed a small crush--"

*" Can you please stop assuming that--"*

--But that didn't seem to be the case. " She continues on, sighing as she says. " I did my best to convince her that you were just a normal kid. Strange as you were, I believed you didn't have bad intentions. While she had reason to suspect that you may be one of those " people ", I advocated against it."

" But, I guess she was right to suspect you to some extent after all." Tamako frowns. " You threatened me into arranging a meeting with Yuki, and with such a look that sent shivers down my spine. I have to ask; why? "

" That's something I'd like to keep between her and I once I get to see her." Beryl's tone was seldom. " Please contact her." He requests once more.

*" Are you so worried because the White Room might come for you and your family? "*

With that question sputtering from her mouth, barely even thinking. The dots suddenly connected, Beryl's expression shifted a bit, giving her the signal that she was spot-on. *But one thing was bothering her about it...*

" How are you so sure the White Room would be coming for you? "  
" She decided to ask.

" I've been followed all week, Tamako-san. Surely, you'd understand that dread too. " He answered her. But that's not an answer that satisfied her.

*Sure, he has a point to be worried. Being watched constantly is not a good feeling, especially when you don't know where those stares are coming from. It makes you paranoid. And any other person would've chalked that down as to why Beryl was acting like this but...*

"....It seems to me, even before you were followed. You already expected that." She said. " Tell me, *honestly*. Did you? "

" Yeah." Beryl doesn't bother with hiding his intentions, and he wants to make it clear to her by being a little more honest than usual. " I don't know plenty details of the White Room like you do, but it's concerning to think of the possibilities. It has some part of the government involved, correct? In that case it's likely they tracked down this cafe where Sagami has visited a number of times. And the two people she's talked to the most are you and me."

" Call me paranoid all you want, but there's no denying it any further after you've confessed to your past in the white room. And the fact that you admitted to sensing multiple presences keeping an eye on you since she revealed this to the world. So yes, I'm sure the White Room will get ahold of you or I if we leave them unchecked. "  
" He finalized.

"....You really are something else, you know that?"

Tamako was suprised by his accurate deductions. *Was this kid a genius*, she wondered. Blessed not only on appearance, but the mind as well. And beneath all of that are what seems to be an endless ocean of mysteries. She's discovering too many new aspects of Beryl today than for the past month he's worked here.

" You've raised some fair points,"

*Though...*

" But there is no need to worry. The White Room will shut down soon, and all these troublesome people will go away." She gestures with her open palm, " Like this; *Poof!* "

" I can't trust that."

" Oh, but you should. It'd be less stressful if you do."

" And why is that?"

" Why? Well, it's simply because the individual you asked for is going to deal with it." She confidently said.

*Still*, Beryl can't trust that completely.

" Beryl," before he could think any further, a comforting hand patted his shoulder. His eyes focus on Tamako's soft expression as if she were trying to ease his worries. It didn't really work though. But her next words caught his curiosity.

" The girl spent the rest of the decade preparing for this moment. Yuki is a smart girl who doesn't half-ass things. She's determined to the brim, so I doubt she'd start a war if she can't guarantee her win. By aggravating the White Room now, it means that she's without a doubt ready." She assured.

*For you to trust her this much....* Beryl narrowed his eyes.

" How long have you known her?"

" Hm?"

" You mentioned before that you've known her since way back. But your age difference is only that of a five-six year gap. It doesn't make sense." Beryl strokes his chin. " You admitted you were from the White Room....and it doesn't take much to guess that you must've worked there, like one of those instructors revealed from those videos. " Tamako flinches at the mention of her previous occupation.

*Yuki dropped out at the age of 13, so they couldn't have met as instructor and student. Nor student to student. So they must've gotten to know each other from the outside...* Beryl silently thinks. Didn't Yuki also mention she knew Tamako way back? Their stories aligned, apparently they met back in her teens, but that could be a lie considering the detective made up her persona of a socially anxious worker. It's possible they may have met not too far back. But with an answer at hand, another question arises; *How did they come in contact with each other?* For the White Room to let go of Tamako.....now that he thinks about it, that should be impossible. The woman shouldn't even be here right now. It should be certain that she'd be taken up for questioning considering her previous occupation--

He finally speaks.

*" You faked your age, didn't you? "*

Tamako's eyes widened, her mouth parting in surprise. But Beryl didn't stop there.

*" Not only that...but the Tamako-san I know now. That's not your real identity, is it. "*

Silence dawned between them after he uttered those words. It was the absolute conclusion Beryl had come to, had he been led with the statement made up by the two of them, which was going way back during their teenager years. Things wouldn't add up right.

They couldn't have met up from the outside during Tamako's mid-twenties either due to the fact that the White Room would've kept a close eye on its subordinates such as the instructors. Not to mention it's unlikely for an instructor between the age of twenty and thirty to be able to work at a place like that unless they were a prodigy at the things they do. Which certainly isn't Tamako's ability, he could discern that much. And they couldn't have interacted as students due to obvious previously mentioned reasons....which leaves only...

" The White Room never officially released you from duty." Beryl states. " For whatever reason, I'm assuming you ran away from it completely. And then changed your identity so you could live a peaceful life without them having to bother you again. Perhaps even undergone facial surgery just to be sure, and that could explain why you look younger for your age, even if it's fake. If I were to make an estimate, you should be around your late 40's and above. That should be more believable, and an ample enough time for you to meet Yuki while rewriting your whole identity. "

"....My goodness, you really are a terrifying child." Tamako couldn't believe it. How was he able to dissect her so quickly? Even when she spoke truthfully but kept it vague for him, he still managed to come up with this much. *And the fact he isn't..*

A strange thought followed after, but it only indulged in the crude humor. *What if Beryl was also...*

.....

"....Well, there's no reason for me to lie." Tamako decides, if information is what he wants then she'll give that. " Strange as it is, your assumption is accurate." And that's the problem.

" Then that gives you more reason as to why you should perform my request." Beryl sharply says.

" And how?" She asks, though already had an idea.

" The fact you're being followed. While I am in the same situation, yours is comparably a lot worse than mine, given the

situation you confirmed to me about yourself. You escaped the white room illegitimately and created a whole new identity for yourself. If whoever is following us were to capture you first, it'll only be a matter of time before they find out who you are." He narrows. " And then everything you have now, everything you've worked for, putting the past behind-- will all be for nothing. Punishment will probably await you, that is, with your life taken away. "

*The very same thing Beryl is trying to avoid.*

" But not before extracting whatever information you have on Sagami to gain some sort of advantage. With that, you should reconsider your position on the matter and heed my request. For both our sakes." He said.

" Tell me," Tamako leans her chin on the top of her palm. " What exactly do you have to say to Yuki? If it's anything important, I want to know as well."

" I already said it's something I want to discuss with Sagami alone." He responds.

" Then that's a shame considering that will never happen."

Before Beryl could respond, Tamako continues.

" Don't misunderstand. You were right on the mark, my worries are exactly as you surmised. However..." She leans back on her seat releasing a deep sigh. " She'll never heed my words."

" Does she suspect you? " *That would be a problem*, Beryl didn't see this coming. Was their trust one-sided all along--

" It's a safety precaution." Tamako corrects, " Your worries about the White Room are the exact worries she's thought of day-by-day. She's looked through all the possible angles, each of her choices are calculated to the most minute detail. All of that in order to maximize her security."

" Even if it meant seeing me as her potential enemy." Tamako says, her face slowly forming a smile. " That girl is smart, you see. She'll never answer my calls, nor will she call me at all. She

typically comes to meet me by herself at her specific terms."

" When will she meet you next?" Beryl asked, his patience remained strong. But he had to admit it was slowly chipping away at him, he predicted the complexity of this situation but to think Yuki would actually...

" That, I do not know. And honestly it's unlikely."

" Why?"

" It's not part of her plan." She shrugs. " In fact, I don't even know what's her plan. So you and I are truly in the same boat."

"....So not even you, huh." Beryl tries to rethink his next moves. If Yuki really did predict this much then....his interrogation will have been pointless from the start. Tamako doesn't seem to be lying to him about all of this.

"...*You have to figure out something.*" Beryl tries again. Tamako looks to him, though she wondered if he said that to her or to himself.

Still, Tamako answers whatever remaining question he could possibly have left with the same solemn tone.

" Beryl. Even if I wanted to reach out to her, I couldn't. I don't know why I'm telling you this but..." Tamako wants to ease the boy's worries, even just a bit. It's clear he's overprotective not for himself, but for his family. " Yuki has a plan. I'll repeat this as many times as I have to convince you; She won't fail. She's thought of every possible action the White Room will take. Among them, is our current situation."

" The people that are tailing us are being tailed by Yuki's company as well." She smiles at him. " You're a smart boy, but it seems even you can overlook a few things. Let this beautiful lady bless you with a querie to ask yourself then; *Why do you think we haven't been captured yet?* "

" Contrary to your assumption, I actually have." Beryl muttered back, craning his head with his hands as he releases a sigh. " Simply acting " normal " wouldn't have stopped them. So something else must've stalled them. Likely sending her own company to keep a



watchful eye on those spying on us. Adding the fact that since the White Room's reveal, the people behind the facility are probably trying their best to lay low and recoup. Trying to kidnap me in the open and risk getting caught will only spell destruction for them."

Tamako laughs. *God, this kid really is something.* She thinks. It was similar to Yuki in a way, this kid was just as articulate about these things as her. If it weren't for their age difference, Tamako might've humored the thought that Beryl was another student in the Fourth Generation alongside Yuki. But that isn't the case, and so that thought should be dispelled to the depths of the human mind.

" Well then, I guess my input was useless to you--"

" No, not really." Beryl interrupts. " At the least, you've confirmed some major thoughts I had before coming here. It wasn't useless, so thank you."

That wasn't a lie. He's gotten to learn more about Yuki's character from this woman's insights, so it wasn't a complete waste of time. Though he'll have to figure out another approach, or another way to get in contact with Yuki somehow.

.....

Before silence could take place between them, or when he decides that that's that and gets up to leave. Tamako decides to keep up the conversation.

" This might sound unbelievable to you but....you should have faith in Yuki."

That immediately ropes his attention. Tamako chuckles, taking the opportunity to speak before he could.

" When I ran from the White Room and sought to change myself. She tracked me down. And questioned me in a way similar to what you're doing at this moment, now that I think about it, this entire conversation feels like *deja vu*." She mused. " She was persistent into getting any information from me. And I was stubborn because I thought I couldn't trust her. After all, the point of erasing your previous identity is to act like it never existed in the first place, yes? If I admitted my previous affiliation. That would be contradictory to

my goal."

" And how did she get you to crack?" Beryl asked.

" She asked me about my regrets." She solemnly answered, her smile now dropping. " She constantly asked me my reasons for running away. It chipped away at me, it was such a dirty tactic for her to pull, really, but...yeah blah, blah, blah she convinced me and all that..."

She sighs.

Once she was reminded of the past. She knew running away would be pointless. Some part of her resonated with Yuki's outlandish goal. To destroy the White Room was something she thought would remain a fantasy.....yet, she still chose to indulge her. And look where we are now; that same girl's about to make it reality. She thinks back to the reason she left in the first place. The anger, the sadness, the remorse-- everything. It was scary to her. Tamako was well-aware it was too late to ask for forgiveness especially after the things she voluntarily allowed herself to do, but what happened on a certain day truly changed her...

The faces of two young teens clad in white, flashed in her mind for a split-second.

.....

She doesn't linger there for long though. It never ends well for her.

" But the main thing I wanna tell you is to just....relax. Alright? " She brings back her previous mood. The chirpy Tamako everyone knows and loves. " Yuki's got this! So have faith in that detective, and don't go off and do anything stupid on your own!"

That's honestly one of Tamako's current worries. The fact Beryl revealed more facets of himself was bizarre, and it invited potential trouble he might cause in search of his goal. As an adult, and as his

boss-- she must prevent any harm coming his way. She's only telling these things to him so openly because if he chooses to act on his own then he could land himself in a pit he wouldn't be able to get himself out of.

Beryl senses the lady must've left something out. But he doesn't ask. There's no need to. Not after he'd seen a glint of regret reflecting from her irises during that awkward pause.

" I'll turn a blind eye for this one. So I expect you to do the same, okay?" She winks. " For both our sakes. Let's act as normal so these stupid stalkers won't suspect anything, yeah?"

" Well, given what we discussed. That's the only choice we've got." Beryl nods. " Thank you for your time."

" No problem, kiddo!" And she's back to normal, flashing him the same bright smile. Strawberry's very own-- Tamako.

~~~~~

There was nothing else left to do but head home. And as he did so, he was left to ponder in his own thoughts. About what he's learned today. About Yuki. About the White Room. And those bothersome gazes following his every move.

Tamako suggested to keep calm putting faith in Yuki that everything will turn out all right. But his instincts were screaming at him otherwise, refraining himself from ever truly letting it all go and leaving the situation be. He felt he had to do something. *Anything*. That could safeguard this life from having to intertwine with its former.

But...

There's no opening. Crossing paths with Yuki is an unlikely chance, near zero in fact. And it doesn't seem like reaching out to her via close connections would improve that percentage seeing as how Tamako had no way to contact her without arousing suspicion

from the detective. And he can't risk doing anything too flashy and unordinary of what his stalkers are expecting of Hoshino Goldenberyl, he has to stick with being oblivious of the fact he's being watched and continue to act as normal.

With all of that in mind, there really doesn't seem to be anything he can do, is there. Is trusting Yuki really all he's got left? No, perhaps there are other ways. If she really is a detective then she must be stationed somewhere around the city, where the government is centered. He could try that. But.... no. It wouldn't work. That's too reckless, even for him. What reason would he have to go there anyhow, with all these people watching him, they'd definitely think something is off.

.....

He sighs.

The more he thinks of possible approaches, the more he's beginning to consider Tamako's words seriously. This really might be the only option he's got left, and he'd have no choice but to comply to it. Play along, and avoid causing trouble. Though, his thoughts now were contradicting to his words earlier. He'd already known that the White Room was put on a tight leash, with their goal being to lie low and not cause any more controversy. While having to deal with the backlash of the people. As long as Beryl doesn't stray to any detours away from his main path, which is usually occupied by many people. He should be fine.

But if by chance that doesn't work. And he'd have to face them, then so be it. While he can't underestimate their fighting prowess, Beryl was confident he'd win anyway. And if they choose to lay a hand on his family, well, the simple solution to that would be to just kill them off.

It was a crude solution,

But if it all comes down to it-- *then it's the only solution.*

But right now. He'll just have to wait and see how this will all go. See what tricks Yuki is going to pull next, and hopefully-- *for the last time, he's hoping* --that this will all come to an end. He's tired of such a *bothersome ghost* tailing him from behind, lurking, watching, and scrutinizing his new life.

.....

But of course...

" I'm home." He opened the door.

Even just " playing along " won't be so easy...

" Beryl..." Aqua turned to him, but the younger triplet quickly noticed something was off with his expression.

"...." Ruby turned to him, but said nothing.

" Is something wrong?" He asked.

" ... "

~~~~~

" Are you ready, Beryl?"

" Yeah."

"...Let's head out then."

.....

Today was supposedly the first filming of the soon-to-be-popular reality dating show that was *LoveNow!* A show that consisted of handsome and popular teens, from a fashion model to an actress, from a dancer to an instrumentalist, and even including actors in the mix! It was a premise that surely has gripped the interest of many who've seen the promo video.

One would think that entering the set all bubbly and motivated, especially on the first day. Would help boost the overall mood, so that today's work can go as smooth sailing as possible. After all, one of the hardest obstacles anyone could face in the entertainment industry is not about simply grabbing people's attention, and gathering all eyes on you. But rather, it was figuring out how to keep that attention. And build their interest as you go on, and being that type of personality could increase those chances. If you can't even imitate that, then you'd have no business being in that industry. You'd only set yourself up for failure.

But when Beryl glanced at Aqua, he could sense the boy's uneasiness. Though he kept a relatively neutral expression, his emotions still betrayed him through the tiniest details. His shoulders didn't seem lax, and his eyes seemed to be lost in another world, focused on something else. *And Beryl had an idea of what-- who that something else was...*

Bur Beryl decides to leave it be. With all these eyes tracking their every move, openly discussing his past here would be the wrong thing to start off. He could worry less about what Aqua thinks of him now, and more about making sure to act as normal as he can under the eyes of these unknown people. If Aqua does try to open the topic at situations in the open like this, then he's prepared with multiple evasion tactics to smoothly switch the conversation, and Aqua is smart enough to catch on with his intentions. Though, he wouldn't know why.

Right. It doesn't matter now. He's accepted the fact that maybe things will change drastically, the way they view him from now on, especially.

It was clear when he came home that evening.

In their eyes, they didn't see Beryl walk through that door.

*They only saw Kiyotaka.*

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Yuki never thought she would have to see this face again. Of course, she expected to at some point, but only under specific circumstances. And later rather than sooner.

Amethyst meets dull browns, as the two of them sat down on opposite sides of the office desk.

" To think you'd want to do a proper interview...." She started, trying to look for any difference on the woman's neutral expression. " It....suprised me, to say the least."

" I realized that keeping my identity unknown won't gather well

with the crowd. I decided it's best, and that it'd be quicker to shut down the White Room if I allow a proper interview to be held." Mika said, her tone mature like always, as she looked Yuki in the eye without once breaking contact.

Since when did she start caring about shutting down the White Room, Yuki wanted to ask her that. But decides to continue the conversation and see where it goes before she takes any action.

" Yes, I thought of that too. But initially I had to make do with what I'd got at the time," She replied, sending a pointed glance. " But it seems like that'll have to change."

" My apologies. Could you blame a woman for feeling shy?" Mika smiles, portraying her expression with a sprinkle of bashfulness, which almost made Yuki want to gag. But the detective held it in, and remained serious.

" Sign this contract of consent then," Yuki slides over a sheet of paper containing missing details that are to be filled out with Mika's personal information. " If you are serious, that is." She said, intentionally taking the opportunity to gauge Mika's reaction.

But again, to Yuki's surprise, the woman didn't show any reluctance in grabbing a pen and filling out the blanks of the contract. Not a shift in expression that gave away different intentions, not a shred of hesitation in the way her hand remained smooth, no trembling or whatnot. Yuki wondered why that is, could it be possible this woman changed in the last few weeks from when she visited her the first time-- *to which she expected to had been the last time?*

Yuki doesn't ride on the assumptions just yet. Mika was an expert in her field of deception in her own rights, and from what Yuki knows about her character, she *must* have a reason for being here. Something she wants in exchange for this interview. Yet strangely enough, the more Yuki tries to rack up her brain for any ideas as to what that could be..... nothing seemed to pop up. Money, maybe. But why would Mika endanger her safety for money alone? Yuki has all the cards to shut down the White Room, but she never promised to guarantee Mika's safety-- hold on, what if that's what she's after all along? No. It still doesn't add up. Mika was insistent on calling Yuki's plan entirely foolish and full of risks, though she didn't know Yuki was just about to shut everything down within another week. But the point here is that Mika was on the opposite

side of Yuki's beliefs. The woman had no faith this could actually work, but once money was involved, she decided to let an anonymous report go through.

But this interview will no longer remain anonymous. Her identity will be revealed to the world next. She'll be known, and possibly targeted, as a figure of despise. The mother who sold her child for money.

As far as Yuki knows, Mika should have no more cards to play. She's dropping her deck. And she has nothing to gain. So...

" Here," Mika hands the sheet back to Yuki with a smile. " All done. Shall we begin?"

Yuki takes a quick overview of the paper, making sure everything was filled and nothing had been left blank. She hummed as a sign of confirmation before storing the paper in its own folder and then placing it inside one of her drawers.

" Give me some time to set the place up," Yuki turns to her. " And then we'll begin the interview."

" I'll wait then." Mika responded, her voice remaining cordial.

Yuki will find out soon enough. Just what kind of game Mika is trying to play at here. But for now, she can't pinpoint any potential repercussions in taking this interview, at least, none that could delay her results. So it's best to take advantage of this chance before Mika could suddenly change her mind. A proper interview, with voice and video, will appeal more to the public and pull them to her side.

But then, a pause.

"...Actually," Yuki retracts, her eyes narrowing as a smirk began playing across her tinted lips. " A simple interview won't do, Mika." *She has a better idea.*

" Hm? " Mika gleamed with interest at the expression on Yuki's face.

Indeed, Yuki has a brighter idea on how to go about this. One that could hit two birds with one stone. A quicker pace to her results, and to affirm Mika's true loyalties...

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The very first thing Beryl realized when it came to filming a reality TV show was that its screenplay direction was different from drama shows or movie format. You have the usual crew with their cameras, lighting, and audio microphones tracking the moves of the talents as they conversed and make things ' interesting ' for the viewer.

There was no script to follow. Everything was left up to the individuals that would be showcased on screen. They are expected to craft their own scripts, their own special storylines that justify their reason for being on the screen. That justifies their character, and to get the ' love ' they deserve by the end of the show. Beryl thought it was mildly amusing watching Aqua converse with Mem'cho at the bench. She was currently sharing her *for you* page on Instagram, pictures of cute things and whatnot.

And seeing Aqua trying so hard to act like a normal teenager was quite funny indeed. His acting was wearing thin, but he doesn't show. The cameras are always on him, after all. It would be bad to mess up and waste precious time for the crew. Beryl couldn't imagine the annoyance that comes with making idle conversation to make use of the minutes, he was glad acting wasn't his career. And even if it was, he would've still vehemently rejected the role as a candidate in this show had he been told how it works earlier.

*Good thing I work behind the camera*, Beryl thinks as he kept the recorder steady. Slowly adjusting the filter to make it seem more sunny and lively, just to lessen the burden on the editorial department's side once this gets submitted. Though he didn't quite understand his role here, or why Kaburagi insisted for him to be here.

*But...he doesn't complain.*

Ironically enough, the set was currently where he's feeling the most secure. He can go back into his head space, thinking about various things, especially the current situation at hand. He couldn't sense the gazes of those people on him, because they're not permitted to be around the area. He releases a short sigh. Really, it was difficult to ignore his own feelings on the matter. He wanted nothing more than for all of this to just go away along with that ghost following him around, the most unnerving pair of his eyes coming from his own self. Or past self, whatever. He just wanted it gone.

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" Beryl, you've gotta pan the camera closer." The director critiques, " I've noticed you've been filming it like how you'd do with a movie format. But that's not what we're looking for here. We're going for....mundane realistic style, you see? So it could resonate easier with the viewers. Don't worry about adding filters. Let the editors deal with that." The older man said.

" Sorry, that was my bad." Beryl responded blandly, which made the director want to sigh exasperatedly. He didn't see what Kaburagi must've seen in the kid to warrant him joining the camera crew.

Reality Shows are more time-constrained in comparison to movies, especially those of the dating genre. As a crewmember, you'd want to immediately capture the most entertaining bits, scenes that would warrant excitement, joy, sadness, anger, sympathy from the viewer as they watch these stars try to go about their lives and find "love". And often times, those moments are typically found in the most ordinary settings where most people would often overlook in their daily lives. Each filmed episode constitutes a deadline, as the producers has taken into account the age, education, and schedules of these young teens. Weekends were the only available time to get some good footage to cut and edit. So messing up or filming below the standard is not acceptable.

*But it's not like the kid didn't have some talent...* The director of course had noticed his ability. He's seen the trending scene from that show...." Sweet Today " or something like that. And Kaburagi had informed him beforehand that Beryl was responsible, as shown in the ending credits of the final episode. Perhaps if this were a normal show instead of the reality genre, he would've excelled. But oh well, guess he has to play with the cards he'd been dealt. No use in complaining now. He'll just have to hope Beryl can catch on quicker than others.

" Anyway, just--"

*" Um, excuse me..."*

A new voice gently inserted themselves in the conversation. Both the director and Beryl turn their heads to a rather particular individual with short blue hair ( *for some reason, the styling oddly reminding Beryl of Kana's, minus the height* ) and her turquoise colored eyes. Her expression seemed hesitant, but resolved for something.

*Kurokawa Akane...* Beryl remembered.

" I just wanted to ask if...I'm doing things alright...?" She timidly asked with her notepad on hand.

Honestly.

Beryl can't seem to recall anything remarkable from her. It's nearly half the day, and he did manage to get some time filming her conversing with the other cast but.... she did nothing special. She was far too reserved, and not in a cool manner like Morimoto. She was awfully shy, clearly not fitting in all too well with this type of show format. Beryl could sympathize with her struggle.

Meanwhile, the director answers her.

" Well, if you can make seem you're on closer terms with everyone else when the camera focuses on you. That would help out a lot. The viewers want something heart-racing after all." He advised her.

" Oh, makes sense..." She takes that all in, diligently writing it down in her notepad.

" Don't force yourself though." Beryl suddenly said, catching the attention of his supervisor, and the suprised look from Kurokawa.

She nods and even smiles a bit. " Of course I won't, Beryl-san." She said before walking away, seemingly dead set on testing the advise she'd been given.

" So...."

Beryl glances at the older man.

*" Is that how you're going to play it?"*

" What do you mean?" The director asked, his eyes responding in a battle against Beryl's. Interest seemed to finally spark in them.

" Just wondering," Beryl breaks eye contact, instead focusing back on recording the new conversation happening between Aqua and Sumi. " About...everyone's *integrity* when it all comes down to it."

" Integrity?"

" Something ' heart-racing '. That adjective can be suggesting many. You can take it several ways, both good and the bad. " Beryl

said with hints of amusement in tone, quickly understanding how reality shows truly work their 'entertainment'.

"What point are you trying to get at here?" The director asked, his smile now gone. He felt something was off with Beryl's choice of words there, he thought, it was almost as if...

"...Nah, it's nothing." Beryl shakes his head. "Forget I said anything, boss." He says before going back to operating the camera. He could feel the older man's wavering gaze on him as he continued like nothing happened.

The director places a gentle hand on his shoulder, causing Beryl to turn to him again.

"Why don't you take a break, kid?" He said with the same smile, though Beryl could tell it's forced. Was this his attempt of placating him, by staying on his good side?

"I'll take things from here. Come back after 15 minutes, why don't you grab a bite to eat? Surely you must be starving under all this heat, yeah?" He said.

It wasn't like Beryl was going to use the info against him. Not yet at least. Not unless a situation pops up that requires him to, he was simply going to leave it be. But he understands the director's logic here, indeed, it's best to put out the fire now than let it spread.

*And hey. Who was Beryl to reject a snack break?*

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Beryl gazes down at the snack table holding up plates of delicious snacks from chips and mini-sandwiches, all the way to desserts and japanese mochi. Everything looked so good, but pure to his genes, he listens to his sweet tooth and goes for the shortcakes. Taking a few pieces and adding it onto his paper plate, he was just about ready to throw this blueberry cream one right into his mouth--

" Oh that looks tasty!"

--When suddenly a cutesy voice interrupts his peace. Still holding the short cake above his mouth, his eyes glance to the side, only to see the short blonde streamer from earlier; the popular Mem-Cho.

Before taking the time to answer, he continues on with what he was initially about to do; Which was savoring this sweet treat in the confines of his mouth. Ignoring her for the time being, he focuses on the sweetness of the shortcake, it was just right, not too sugary, and the blueberry flavour balanced it all out with its soft pillow-like acidity.

" Do you have a sweet tooth for desserts? " She asked him.

" I suppose so." Beryl answers curtly, before chucking in another piece into his mouth. The taste reminding him of a warm memory from back then, his first scoop from " the plane of diabetes " courtesy of his mother, who also had a sweet tooth for desserts herself.

Mem-cho couldn't seem to stop staring at him for some odd reason. Which Beryl obviously noticed.

" What is it?" He asked her.

She blinks, before throwing her hand to her mouth and releasing a small giggle. " Sorry, sorry! I just blanked out there for a second, huh?"

" It's just...I can't get over the fact." She grins.

" What fact?" He replied.

" Beryl, the more I look at you. You really do look like a girl! "

She exclaims, Beryl already felt like sighing but this wasn't the end of her point as she seemed to have more to say. So she continued. " I can't help but picture it in my head, a bit of make up here and there, and styling your hair differently..." She visualizes aloud before a beaming smile takes place on her innocent features. " It'd be perfect!"

" Could this count as harassment? It should. Right? Yeah, it probably does." Beryl says before snapping his index and thumb together loudly enough. " Security! Please escort this--"

" K-KIDDING! I WAS KIDDING! DON'T CALL THEM--"

*Even if she is a cast member, Mem-Cho was not too keen on getting into any sorts of trouble here, misunderstanding or not!*

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Mem-Cho was currently stuffing her face with snacks while she stood at the table beside Beryl who had just finished with his. He decided to spectate more of Aqua and Sumi's interaction, and from what he can observe. It seems the two of them are sharing bits and pieces about themselves. Besides the sounds of obnoxious chewing and moans of delight coming from the girl beside him ( Though he believed she's doing those out of spite-- ) he was mostly left alone to wander into his own thoughts once more.

He observed the girl cuddling up to Aqua currently, Sumi Yuki. Recalling her occupation as a young teen fashion model, she had an



absurd amount of sense for the camera. And it seems like out of everyone else here he's observed, she has the most likable personality. Effortlessly portraying a kind, innocent, slightly naive girl who's genuinely searching for love. Perhaps it came natural to her considering it's not too far off from her actual personality, she only has to exaggerate it just a tiny bit whenever the cameras are on her. Just like what she's doing to Aqua right now, teasing him, and trying to get him flustered which worked slightly judging by the small blush that accompanied his older brother's face.

Sumi Yuki...

He recalls meeting her for the first time during the promo video discussion. Her first name definitely strike a chord within him, but it also reassured him back when things were...peaceful. He believed that the Yuki from the cafe was just some random stranger after all, and that the name really was just commonplace as Sumi's. But that's all changed for the worse. And now he can't help but think of Sagami Yuki whenever he hears someone mention Sumi's given name.

*But he has to stay calm. Don't do anything rash. Let everything play out as it's supposed to before taking any action.*

" Hey, Goldy, can I ask you something?" Mem-cho suddenly spoke, and hold on did she just...

" ' Goldy '? " He repeated, turning to her with a questioning expression.

She nods, giving him a toothy grin. " My nickname for you! Do you like it?" She seemed extremely confident with the way her *blue contact lenses* sparkled.

" Sure, I like it." He answers.

" Really--?" But before Mem-Cho could celebrate too early--

" **No. Don't ever call me that again.**" He deadpanned immediately.

" H-huh? Is it really that bad?! I think it sounds cute!" She

defended herself. " B-Besides, with a name like ' Goldenberyl ' there's really not much material I can work with here!"

" Or you could actually just refer to my real nickname which is ' Beryl ' like every other normal person would?" He blandly suggested.

" But I give everyone special nicknames to everyone here, ya know!" She pouts. " I even gave one to your brother when I got closer to him today."

" And what do you call him?" He humors her.

" Aqu-tan! " She brazenly announces.

" .....Truly unfortunate, my heart goes out to him." Beryl sighs, placing a hand on his chest where his heart should be as he imagined the twitching of annoyance from Aqua's eyes when Mem-cho started calling him this.

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Suddenly, Mem-Cho has gotten another bright idea.

" What about *Berylpon*? "

Beryl recoils with the sheer absurdity from that nickname, causing multiple revulsions to coarse through his blood flow within seconds.

" You're actively attacking my human rights if you dare use that nickname." He hissed.

" Then let me call you Goldy then!" She grinned devilishly, subtly indicating with those mischievous eyes of her that she has way worse names in store if he doesn't let her have what she desires. Beryl saw this as a clear challenge to establish his resolution on anyone who dares oppose him, not a person-- girl or boy --has ever conquered his will.

But...

" Just know I'll get you back for this. Seven-fold, that is."

He ~~threatens~~ warns her as he opted for a tactical retreat this time

Mem-Cho could already feel the heavy weight of her consequences crawling atop her back from his words alone, to put simply, she was in danger for whatever it is Beryl has planned as retaliation. But at the moment, she couldn't care less. She was satisfied.

" Goldy it is then~!" She proudly repeated, Beryl rolls his eyes, odd nostalgia hitting him as he reminisced back to the earlier days when he hadn't accepted his current name as faithfully as he did now.

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His break was almost up, he should start heading back to his station, or go to ask the chief in charge about--

" Hey, Goldy, can I ask you something?"

A twitch of a brow from the distasteful nickname.

" What is it?" Still, he doesn't let that stop her from asking.

She hums for a moment, seemingly visualizing the words in her head. Leaving him quite curious because as far as he knew, Mem-Cho didn't seem to hold the regular capacity required to *think*--

" I was just wondering...." She starts off, her gaze focused on Aqua as the director gave him some advice to work on. She turns to him with a rather concerned look. " Is everything between you and Aquatan alright?"

The question caught Beryl by surprise, though he didn't show it.

" Yes," He lies, though he wished it to be true. " Why do you ask?"

"....Liar." She pouted, turning away with her hands rested behind her back. " Don't try to lie to me!" She wagged her finger, almost smugly. " You may not know this but I'm an elder sister of two younger brothers, you see." She suddenly revealed, earning more of Beryl's genuine surprise.

" Anyone with siblings themselves can catch onto other pairs of siblings if something had gone wrong. Or turned sour. " She confidently stated. " So don't try to play it cool, I'm just going to see through it, hehe~"

After a round of giggling to herself like a maniac, she coughs and goes back to the main topic at hand. Which was addressing what had exactly turned sour between him and Aqua.

" Sooo~?" She begins to prod. " Was it a fight? A verbal disagreement? Did someone get a lil' more ice cream than the other? " She began listing off pitiful causes that typically are the roots of sibling fights. But Beryl didn't have these sort of arguments with Aqua, ever. But he certainly did so with Ruby. All the pettiness in the world, that's for sure.

But none of her reasons came close to his problem. With not just Aqua, but with Ruby too. Or more precisely the problem being that was him and the revelation of his past.

As Mem-Cho continued to list down even more reasons, practically talking to herself at this point. Beryl wanted nothing more than to end this conversation and get back to work, but he wanted to see more from her perspective, how she saw their rift. So he interrupts her with a question of his own.

" What made you think something was wrong between Aqua and I?" He asked.

She hums again in thinking, and after that short pause, she opens her mouth to answer.

" When you two entered the set. I felt a tension between you two. It was...so unlike the vibe you two gave off back at the promo video we prepared last week! Nobody else seemed to notice besides me but that's to be expected since as far as I know, I'm the only other person here who has siblings." She began to go into more detail, " Back at the promo video, you two would find a way to chat with each other no matter how short. But now? I haven't seen the two of you spoken a single word to each other! You guys weren't like *super close* from the outside, but I could feel that you guys must've had a stronger bond on the inside. And today that bond felt like...it's slowly drifting apart. And maybe I'm being too pushy here but it

gets me worried, y'know? "

Mem-Cho clearly prioritized and valued family above all else. Something the Hoshino triplets could relate to as well. And while fights did certainly happen within the Hoshino household, they were easily fixed over the course of a few days. But now...

The problem is beyond that. This isn't a fight, there isn't any disagreement but....it's a matter of acceptance. A matter of security, as far as Aqua is concerned. So this ' rift ' can't be remedied so easily, if there even is a way to remedy it at all.

" I see, well, maybe you're overthinking it." Beryl lies, not because he wanted to. But it was for her own sake as well. Mem-Cho...as annoying of a personality she can be, and as big of a bully material she is for Beryl-- she means well. And it clearly shows in how sincere her concerns are when it comes to family. And perhaps, there's a deeper story to her than meets the eye but that's not his priority right now. It'd be best to have Mem-Cho go on living her life without having to worry about his problem.

He doesn't wanna pull any unnecessary people into it.

" I wouldn't have come here with Aqua if we did get into a disagreement." He pointed out, " So there's no need to worry. He and I are fine. " He assured her, flashing her a small smile.

However small it was, or however short it lasted, it left a suprising effect on her. Leaving a red blush on her cheeks to form with just the faintest hue. She'd began to realize just how handsome Beryl really is when he wasn't being such a menace.

" A-Ah! Maybe you're right!" She stammers, quickly trying to erase all previous thought. " Gosh, who was I to worry? Even if you probably did get into a fight, it'd probably resolve in a few days...or weeks." She muttered the last part, almost in a whisper, but he heard it nonetheless.

" Yeah." And he was hoping for either of those to become true.

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Saturday passed by without another hitch.

But on Sunday, an update had been dropped regarding the case of the " White Room ". Apparently, due to the pressure from the public and from the media, the government has prematurely decided to begin the case on the misdeeds of Naoe Jinnosuke, and his production of project White Room.

The headline stunned millions in Japan as they eagerly awaited the first day of trial, the majority siding with the female detective Sagami Yuki in unearthing what's beneath the lies of this politician and the cruelty he'd allowed to be done unto children. But it wasn't just the locals who were eager to see how this goes, but those from beyond the nation as well. Billions of people who had access to social media or television began mentally timing their countdown till the first day of trial begins, the lot of them sympathized with Yuki's cause, or what they *think* is her cause. Most were under the impression that Yuki initiated this conviction due to her good-willed nature to ' save ' those like her. But really, even *she* had no better intentions, because for her this was all simply long overdue vengeance. Regardless, her predestined results will not have changed.

And on a *small iddy widdle side note...*

The first episode of LoveNow was quite well-received....

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After the weekend concluded, another school week had begun on Monday. Naturally, the news about the trial became the big talk among students and teachers alike. It was an inevitable result, after all.

But for Ruby, she's never felt so uncomfortable with all the reminders it left her...

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Moving onto lunch time, Ruby and Minami quickly paired together and occupied one desk, ready to dig into their lunches after simultaneously muttering the same gratitude for the blessings of food.

Minami's pink jades wandered down to Ruby's lunch.

*That looks so good...* Minami thought to herself, though it wasn't the first time this has crossed her mind.

There was always something special about Ruby's lunches that Minami has been questioning herself almost everyday. It looked, smelled, and probably tasted *homely*. She thought her mom must be a great cook...

" Do you want some?" Ruby's voice interrupted her thoughts, Minami blushes in embarrassment and begins to stammer with her words, " A-Ah! Sorry, didn't mean to stare there..."

" It's okay," Ruby smiles kindly, as she took one of her fried shrimp and placed it on Minami's container lid placed at her side. And then adding other bits of her lunch to balance it all out.

" R-Ruby--!"

" It's okay, jeez!" Ruby laughed, she hasn't done that in a while. " Please, go ahead. We're friends! Besides, I didn't feel like eating too much anyway." She assured her. *She didn't lie, though.*

Minami finally believes her with a sigh of resignation before slowly picking the food Ruby has so kindly given to her with her chopsticks, dropping it gently into her mouth before she begins chewing...

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"!!!"

Immediately, a burst of flavor coursed through her entire being. *This....This is fresh?* She thought in wonder, she expected it to be pre-made food straight from the package, but Minami can taste the difference enough to know that it was not. No. This tasted handmade, it tasted way too delicious to come from just a package!

" Does it taste good--"

" **It tastes great!!!**"

"...."

Immediately, Minami buckled down in embarrassment after saying that a lil' too loud. Which earned some strange looks from the few number of students that wanted to eat in the classroom in peace. Muttering an apology over and over, Ruby snorted in amusement. Though she had to agree. Not a day went by where she didn't enjoy her lunch.



" Ruby, your mom must be a great cook, huh?" Minami said.

Ruby felt a bit awkward, but it was fair for Minami to assume so. Though the idea of her still being alive to this day, making her these homemade lunches, fills her with so much joy. Even if it's just a thought, or a fantasy. It'd be...something she wouldn't mind living in. Unfortunately, that isn't the case in reality.

" Ah, actually." Ruby begins to correct, " It's actually Kiy-- BERYL'S. It's....*Beryl's* cooking."

" Eh? Really?" Minami's eyes widened in surprise.

Ruby mentally reeled herself back, the whiplash of nearly saying that other name, it caused panic to churn in her stomach. Thankfully enough, she caught herself just in time. But now her lunch tasted bitter.

She looked towards Minami, looking to see if she caught any of that. But what Ruby saw wasn't suspicion or confusion or any of that sort, instead she saw a beaming smile accompanying the model's face.

" So Beryl can cook, huh. That's pretty nice." She heard her say. " Is he plannin' to be a chef? 'Cause making homemade meals everyday with this type of quality is not an easy thing to keep up."

For some reason, Minami's topic of conversation led Ruby to a chamber of memories. The good ones. The memories of when she only knew Beryl as Beryl and not....

After humming in thought, she answers. " He did at some point. But then he got kinda bored so now he's just doing it as a hobby." She shrugged. It was a shame really, she could perfectly imagine Beryl opening a restaurant and serving good food had he continued to pursue it. It would've made a pretty good dream.

" That's a shame..." Ruby agrees. " Honestly, all of ya are so full of talent." Minami beams again. " You must be proud, right, Ruby?"

*Proud...*

Ruby smiled, nodding.

Yes.

Of course she was. How could she not? Aqua can act and is very diligent, always exhibiting good grades. Beryl is the same, just a bit more to the lazy side of things, he's sometimes way too laidback for his own good. But he has knowledge of several stuff due to the few times he gets determined to do something. And as for her, she can dance! And partly sing ( She promises she'd work on that! ) [ Side note: She is not letting her friend's previous comment about her singing slide. ] and all this talent certainly came from the most talented person she's ever seen and idolised. Her wonderful mama, that is!

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As Minami and Ruby continued to chat away, she wishes she could get distracted by the conversation just like a few minutes ago. She wishes her thought process remained focus on being proud of her brothers, and her late mother.

But...

*Her mind couldn't seem to stray itself away from Kiyotaka.*

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" She's so pretty..."

" Hey, isn't she someone from the performing arts department? What is she doing in our class?"

" Don't you know who she is? That's..."

Murmurs went around the classroom as they all stared at this unusual figure who had just decided to walk in. Her steps were

defined with elegance, and her face looked it was crafted beautifully by the gods, her expression calm. Not giving anything away. Or her intentions. Her vibe completely aloof to the shock of those around her.

But then her movement stops at a table situated at the back. She stopped in front of a group of 5 friends, but her eyes paid little attention to the four except one. Humming to herself, as she greets him,

" Beryl, I'd like to eat lunch with you, if you're free. "

Her tone was soft, and absolutely monotone. Yet one could still feel her aura from her words alone, which had others stare at her in amazement or intimidation. The group of boys; Takeo, Shin, Jun, and Asahi all blinked simultaneously in confusion, as they also turned to each other and then to the fifth person and then back to the girl.

"....Shiranui Frill," Beryl finally acknowledges, with a deep sigh that followed soon after. Shiranui awaited, almost eagerly. Though you'd have to look closer into her mind to notice that.

S....Shiranui Frill...! All four boys processed at once. Finally on the same page with everyone in the class who saw her walk in the first time.

Takeo gulped, feeling intimidated by her presence, and due to his comical fear of women.

Shin blushed, stunned by her beauty.

Jun was flabbergasted by the intensity of her eyes.

Asahi was nudging all three of his friends to snap out of it--!

" Sorry, but I planned to eat lunch with my friends." Beryl apologizes, seeing as it was right to do so. If she had asked earlier before he made any plans, he would've perhaps considered it.

Eh...? Unbeknownst to him, his ' friends ' didn't seem to register that.

" H-huh? He rejected?! " Some hushed whispers exclaimed, but was loud enough for others to hear, having everyone share in the shock.

HE DID WHAT? All four boys snapped their heads to Beryl's direction, sending a fierce glare through the center of his skull.

" Hm...I see." If Frill had any disappointment at all, then she did well in not showing it. Her face remained the same, calm, as ever. And her tone unchanging. " Perhaps some other time will do." But that was to be expected from a multi-talented performer such as her.

Beryl nods, watching her as she turned her back to him and began her march back to wherever the hell she came from--

" WAIT! WAIT! WAIITTTT---!" But suddenly, Takeo stood up and called after her, causing everyone in the room to look at him in bewilderment. But at that moment he couldn't really care much if he was making himself look like a wild baboon in a high school student's uniform.

But it did cause Frill to look back at him with just the smallest hint of confusion.

Beryl raised a brow, wasn't he afraid of women?

" Takeo what are you--" He tried to call out to him but was yanked to the side by an agitated looking Jun.

" What are *YOU* doing!" He hissed. Beryl was confused. Shouldn't *he* be asking that to their strange behaviour?

" You've gotta go with her bro! You're missing your chance, dammit!" He expanded, but it didn't really help Beryl understand the point all that well.

" Beryl...you can't just reject Shiranui Frill like that.... have some bit of tact, will you?" Shin said, with a blush spread across her face, clearly enamored by her beauty.

" She's just a girl," It wasn't his first time rejecting them, after all." She asked me, and I had the right to say no. Besides I don't think she minds--"

" No, no, you don't understand." Asahi interjects with a sigh before shaking his head. " All eyes are on us here because you rejected Shiranui-san just like that. Out in the open. It might affect our reputation..."

" You care about that sorta thing?" Beryl asked.

" Not as much as others," Asahi answers. " But we'd rather not be named the subjects responsible for your potential stupidity in missing a once in a lifetime opportunity like this, going out with such a pretty girl and a popular celebrity like her."

" Especially that last part man, you gotta tell us what it's like!" Jun said with full seriousness.

Beryl was about to respond till' he looked around and heard the whispers. Indeed, some were already going about calling his friends bad influences, making him ' stupid ' for rejecting a cool girl like her. Nobody seemed to target Beryl himself, purely because there was nothing to shame him about. His friends however....were complete average. So the chances of them being blamed for a stupid reason like this isn't improbable.

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" You're shaking," Frill's eyes surveyed Takeo from top to bottom, before settling her gaze on his face. " You called after me, but are you alright?" She may not have sounded like it, but she was showing genuine concern.

" U--uh...." Takeo was sweating mad, his knees threatening to buckle down. He cursed his inability to speak to a girl! *That elementary trauma of being teased by girls is hitting him at full force right now.*

" You see...uhm....Beryl...Beryl actually--"

Suddenly he felt a strong hand lay itself on his left shoulder, and

a familiar voice that followed. " Actually, perhaps we can do that today." He said.

Takeo sighs in relief, calming himself when Beryl shared an assuring look with him, before focusing his gaze back on Frill.

Frill was a bit suprised, looking up to the boy who stood next to Takeo. A multitude of thoughts were hidden by her expression but nonetheless, her lime eyes seemed to have lightened up a bit seeing Beryl reconsider. He supposes she was pleased by the outcome.

Beryl tightens his grip on Takeo's shoulder though. And the latter knew it was his way of saying '*you owe me.* '

For now, he seemed to be okay with that.

But soon he'll come to learn that *owing* Beryl *anything*-- always comes at a cost.

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He ate his packed bento in silence, with Frill seated next to him, at a pretty secluded spot in the school with a somewhat nice view. He was suprised by the fact that Frill knew a spot like this and chose to lead him here, he didn't think she'd be the type to roam around the school. But other than that, he honestly felt awkward.

The rare times he'd been invited to lunch by a girl, and the rarer times he'd *accepted*. He would usually spend his lunch hearing them chattering their mouth away as they ate, barely offering a long response to support the conversation, but sometimes they'd say pretty interesting things and that's when he'd actually take an active participation but..... more often than not he'd feel bored after a while.

He didn't understand, or maybe he just didn't care enough about these type of worries like most boys do (e.g, his friends.) the topic of romance crossed his mind a few times, but he had bland opinions on it. After all, for most of his life, he's only focused himself on keeping two promises. But even so, even if he...had lived normally, he doubted he'd find having a love life all that appealing, him personally.

" Sorry for not speaking. You see, I'm nervous." Frill's voice broke his train of thought, he turns to her with his brow raised.

Her? Nervous?

" Your face doesn't look like it." He remarked, half-teasing, and half-questioning.

She ignored his remark, not that Beryl really minded. He looked down to her lunch and saw that it consisted of a healthy balanced sandwich, as expected of someone of her caliber, he thinks. It's important for a prominent figure in entertainment to keep her figure appealing in the eyes of the viewers.

She remained silent for the most part, which Beryl couldn't decide on whether it was because she's truly not much of a talker like he was (though not as bad as before) or if she was simply gathering her thoughts. He turns back to focus on eating his own lunch, if she wasn't going to talk, then he doesn't have a reason to do so himself. Despite the fact she wanted him here for whatever reason.

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After a few minutes pass, Beryl felt something boring its gaze from his side. At first he thought nothing of it, it wasn't dangerous, but it still felt weird. But again, it's been a few minutes and he decides to confront it.

" For someone who wanted to eat lunch with me, you sure are silent." He turned to look at her. " And for someone so silent, you sure are intent on giving me the creeps with your reptilian eyes, huh?"

She continued to stare at him, unphased.

And then she speaks.

" Have you always worn such a dark look on your face?" She asked, simply.

"...."

Suddenly, the little bit of calm he had left him as her words registered. She continued to gaze at him with discerning eyes. He doesn't look away, even when he wanted to, he figured backing down from her gaze would all but save him now.

" What do you mean? Are you trying to say I'm gloomy?" He responded to her, without breaking contact from her eyes, without his tone betraying anything else.

She turns away, he wondered if she decided to back down first, but she then utters her next reply. " I wanted to speak to you for a while now, " she glances at him again, almost sheepishly. " But the expression you're wearing these days....I figured then that it wouldn't have been the best of times to approach you."

" You looked tense, but tried to act like you weren't. You always seemed to keep your guard up for whatever reason....even as we walked together here. Your eyes were darting left and right, as if searching for something." She said. " Only now did I take the chance to ask you, once I saw you mellowed out. *Though...the tension is still there somewhere, isn't it?*"

She was awfully perceptive of him, he thinks. She likely held loose suspicions at best, he doubts she can see further into his mask beyond what was already said. So he stayed calm, and nonchalant. Opting to question her instead,

"What are you doing staring at me so much that you're able to pick those out?" He asked her.

Her lips upturn a bit, a ghost of a smile playing on her face as she answered, rather coyly.

"What can I say?" Tilting her head at an angle that others would've called cute. "I'm a fan of yours."

Beryl snorts. "Less of a fan and more of a creepy stalker, I'd wager."

She seemed to be amused by his comment, not at all offended. Shiranui Frill was not a person perceived to be sentimental over the little things, but she appreciated that Beryl treated her as just another person he'd meet any other day. His jokes-- *if you could even call it that* --aimed to tease and annoy all those who come across him, with almost little to no filter. And she found herself not hating that part of him like others usually would.

Beryl expected her to go back to her earlier question, prod on him further, but suprisingly enough she allowed that topic to pass. Instead, settling on a new subject.

"I'll be starring in a new drama next week," She suddenly announced, was he supposed to act all hyped up? Like a proud parent? Because he was horrible at that.

"....Congrats?" Beryl didn't know what else to say, Frill hummed thoughtfully before glancing at him again.

"I saw that you're also working on a project. That dating show, right?" She asked, Beryl immediately felt like dissipating into mist upon the mere mention.

"How'd you find out?" He asked, his tone being sapped of what little energy he had these days. But he was curious, there's no way she would've find out by normal means like the credits. Not only did a reality show's credits roll by faster than the average person could digest, but his name wasn't included in among the staff at all.

"I have my connections," She answered, simply. Beryl mouths an 'oh' in realization, it should've crossed his mind way earlier that the

obvious answer would be that. After all, Frill was a major star, who's fame is only steadily growing according to all the news he's seen of her and Ruby's few discussions about her.

Though, he can't really bother too much with that. For the past week, his mind's only been operating on his anticipation for both Yuki and the White Room. Even if he was trying to 'relax' now and let things flow its course, it's still worrisome nonetheless. And besides, acting normal under so many eyes as he goes to school or returning home isn't making things easier.

"So then, my next question is..." He finished his lunch. "Why'd you bring it up?" Frill must've brought up his current occupation for a reason, and it might just be the same reason as to why she wanted him here.

"I watched the episode," she says. "It was quite interesting, I'd say. Though..." She turns to him with a glint in her eye he couldn't define. "I am quite disappointed that you weren't a participant."

Beryl stares at her blankly.

Frill twirls a lock of her dark green hair, continuing. "You could've perhaps made the show interesting. It doesn't require acting, and you can be yourself. Moreover, I found myself imagining the type of dynamics you could form with each cast member....quite entertaining." She said.

"Quit the stalling,"

Frill's eyes widen a bit, for the first time during this entire conversation, her expression has morphed slightly. Beryl sighs.

"You wanted to speak with me for a reason," He says. "Shiranui, it'd be best for you to come out with it now. Otherwise I'm leaving."

"...Oh, what a shame." She tilts her head, her tone almost somber. "I quite enjoyed the small talk, but if you insist..." She muttered.

She hums, before facing him.

"Ever since that episode of 'Sweet Today', your camera directing debut. I was...intrigued. You brought the best sides out of each

actor, capturing the weight of the environment, presenting the emotions portrayed so perfectly for any audience to appreciate. "

Her words were sincere, and from the heart. And she continues,

" It makes me wonder," she hums. " What would it be like if you were to man the camera for *my* show? How will I look like through *your* camera lens, how will you make me....even a *better* performer on the screen." She reaches for Beryl's hand, clasping both her palms on each side of his.

" There is no other way for me to go about this," She stares at him earnestly. " I would like to propose an offer to you, Beryl."

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It was currently dismissal. All students have decided to go home, or stay a while in order to chat with their friends. As the afternoon slowly began its march to evening, as the blue sky was ready to turn to a darker hue, Aqua had been called to meet at a secluded place in the school.

" Ruby," He called out to the figure who waited anxiously before him.

" Big brother, you're finally here..." She said in a low voice, she stopped leaning on the wall and stood up straight, facing Aqua with a distressed expression.

" You called," He simply said before briefly looking around. " I'm guessing...you only wanted to talk to me?" Since Beryl doesn't seem to be around.

Ruby nods, solemnly. Aqua has an idea as to why she called him here, the topic was obvious enough. But in all honesty, he didn't feel any more at ease despite knowing.

" Have you...um...." Ruby starts, hesitating a bit, she played with the hem of her skirt before releasing a sigh. " Have you....talked to him since that day?"

The ' him ' she was referring to...

"...Have you?" He asked back.

She shakes her no.

" Then neither have I.' He answered. He leans against the wall, and begins to think deeply about the situation. He turns to her with a question of his own this time, " So, what ails you? "

Ruby sighs again, frowning.

" I feel like crap, Aqua." She said, bitterly. Her hands reach to comfort her own arms, " I...I don't mean to make it seem like I'm distancing myself. But that's exactly what I'm doing. What *we're* doing."

" Neither of us have talked to him, and I honestly don't know what to say. It's a lot to take in....and the worst part is that he understands how we must be feeling right now, and that's why he hasn't said a word!" Her tone was frustrated.

Aqua listened carefully to her rant, he felt the same as she did. Their little brother's past life is just too...jarring, to say the least. To think he'd been part of an experiment, to think that he was forcefully rid of his emotions since young. As a doctor, and as his brother in this life, he sympathized with him deeply. But it left no room for conversation. It was suffocating.

" So..." Aqua begins his response. " I guess, the question to ask yourself is this." He sighs. " Do you still see him as Beryl, or do you see him as Kiyotaka. "

Ruby was silent at the mention of the latter name. His previous name. His...true name.

" I...I don't know." And she hates herself for it. " I want to see him as Beryl but..." She was hesitating. " How can I? After knowing...he went through all of that. And here I am, just...making things harder for him." She thinks she's the problem.

" I annoy him whenever I could, I fight with him because my temper for him just through the roof, and other stuff. Just because I

think it's normal. Now I'm thinking I'm wrong for that." She stares off to the side, as she continues. " I'm just trouble to him. And he's chained to me, no matter how hard he tries to deny it."

Aqua couldn't refute that. It was true, after all. The promise between them that night, it's something Beryl refuses to break. Not to mention Aqua likely made it worse...with the recent promise he had Beryl make from a week or so.

"...He doesn't think that. I'm sure you know, Ruby." Still, Aqua tells her the facts. " Trouble? Sure you are. But I don't think he'd have it any other way."

" But I get it." he sighed. " It's hard to open up to him about this. We don't know how he feels about the White Room, and I don't even know if he's willing to give us an honest answer. But... I think he prefers we still see him as our little brother. Instead of Kiyotaka. " He tells her that, but he was a hypocrite for saying this. He, too, cannot separate him from his past life.

Not to mention his lingering worries of various scenarios. Aqua couldn't confirm it for sure but....for the past week. He's been feeling like someone was watching him. He couldn't relax at all. The gaze was piercing, and it frustrated him deeply that he doesn't know why. He wondered if it was just his paranoia, but each day that passes, it's getting harder to determine.

" Do you think this could all be fixed, Aqua?" Ruby genuinely asked. Sending him a hopeful look.

Aqua felt his heart waver at her expression, she genuinely wanted to move on. To start talking to their little brother again. Like the White Room never existed, like the name Kiyotaka never existed. But the truth of the matter....

"... I can't be sure." Is unchanging. " We'll have to get used to it, and find out ourselves." It wasn't going to be easy to separate the two but. " And once we've got our answer. We'll tell him. He's probably waiting for it." this is all they had to go by.

Ruby nods in agreement, feeling slightly better after having this talk. Despite the inner turmoil she had in her mind right now, she found a sense of peace after having confided her feelings to Aqua.

*Our answer, huh... Ruby hopes it'll come sooner rather than later.*

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The trial for Project White Room begun two days later. The prosecutors consisting of Yuki and her team of lawyers, going against the accused, Naoe and the lead director of the White Room, Atsuomi. It was the start of a long battle to prove her accusations and the connection of a political figure to a taboo project.

At least, to the public, that's how they saw it.

But for Yuki, this was nothing but child's play.

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Immediately, all accusations were addressed against Naoe and Ayanokouji Atsuomi in the room of law. And all previous evidence that Yuki presented a week before had been brought up, to which the defending lawyers' meticulously denied, setting up alibis and half-true explanations. Undermining the actual program of the white room, calling out Yuki's evidence to have been possibly scripted or edited, and pure hyperbole. Proclaiming that her ' files ' of the White Room could have easily been forged. But these were weak defenses, statements formed out of desperation.

And it took all of Yuki's professionalism to not laugh hysterically during the first court session. With billions watching this on their televisions, or other streaming sites, they waited with bated breaths to see how this will all end...

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Friday comes to an end and it was currently late at night. Miyako, as always, worked diligently on managing internet channels but also laying down the foundations to kickstart the new B-Komachi. The kids ( *they are forever kids in her eyes, her surrogate motherly instincts refused to acknowledge otherwise--*) have all headed to bed by now.

Well, doing it the old fashioned way is not going to work efficiently as it used to. So maybe Miyako can organize a youtube channel for them to showcase their cuteness and talent, but efficient as that is. It still remains a slow process that could take months. But that's pretty much every channel, no? Though if the new B-Komachi takes too long to fire up, all the hype could die down too quickly, essentially killing the group of any chance to rise to stardom.

Luckily enough, Miyako was experienced in taking advantage of the internet. Her role as manager has improved drastically upon Ai's rising, and even as the years go on, she's learned quite a handful of tricks up her sleeve to boost the new B-Komachi's chances.

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Cracking her fingers after a late night's work, she leans back on her seat and releases a deep sigh. Her mind tries to relax....but a thought-- no, *many thoughts* were beginning to bother her. And the cause for it? Well, look no further than the aforementioned " kids " she's taking care of. Something was off with the three of them.

The house was quiet these days. A little *too* quiet, she thinks. And it's bizarre how that concerns her.

Maybe Aqua and Beryl being quiet and keeping to themselves is not unusual behaviour, but Ruby of all people? Being quiet? No, now that's definitely a case of concern. She wasn't arguing with either Aqua or Beryl, no jabs, no nothing. Miyako wondered what happened, because something clearly happened to cause this rift between them, but a rift happening at all was unfathomable to Miyako. Ever since they were young, they played, argued, and caused trouble-- their bond was inseparable, so to speak.

Miyako likes the peace and quiet. But what came with peace was the constant bickering of Ruby and Beryl, with Aqua chiming in most of the time with his deadpan statements, only adding fuel to the fire and giving the poor adult a big migraine each time. But now that it's just....quiet, she can't exactly be at peace. She wondered if she should meddle, but wouldn't that just make it worse? Problems between siblings are complicated sometimes, and from what she read it can usually fix itself in due time.

But this doesn't feel like a typical petty fight. She doesn't feel that way whenever she sees these three barely look at each other, barely speaking a word. And from what she's observed this silence is mostly targeted towards Beryl....which is strange. What did Beryl do? Troublesome of a kid he is, he would never do anything to cause a rift between his siblings. He's smart enough to back down.

.....Maybe she should do something about it. Not directly meddling with it of course, but giving them an opportunity to mend it themselves.

She hummed to herself, thinking of said opportunities in her head.

And then her eyes widen as an idea hits her.



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*" The three of you are to go shopping. I've listed the things we need to stock up on since we're running out. Unfortunately, I can't do it myself since I'm busy today. "* Aqua is currently reading this note left by Miyako on a Sunday morning. While his other two siblings curiously peered their eyes over his shoulder.

*" Beryl and Aqua, I understand that you two won't be busy on Sunday morning. Since you informed me before that the filming for LoveNow will begin in the afternoon instead of the whole day this time, so you've got time to do this quickly. "* Aqua read, sharing a glance with Beryl.

Ruby pats both her brother's backs. " Well, I'm not going! How about you two go instead?" She really wasn't looking up to it.

" She asked for the three of us," Beryl emphasized to which Ruby shrugged with her tongue poking out.

" Furthermore, it says." Aqua clears his throat before reading the final paragraph. *" As for you, Ruby. I know you're going to find an excuse to back out of it but please don't try, you don't exactly have any idol work to do as of now, remember? "*

*"...." Ruby's self-esteem took a hit!*

" S-Still, maybe I could've hung out with my friends today, you know!" She tried to pick up the pieces. " Miyako-san is so mean!"

*Still, she isn't wrong.* Beryl refrained from saying.

Aqua flips the paper on its backside and there was the list she mentioned. Giving a quick readthrough, it was as she said, basically necessities. But there was an extra note on the bottom.

" It says here we can buy whatever want once we complete the list. Just nothing too expensive." Aqua reads out.

" Anything...?" Both Ruby and Beryl muttered.

It's been a while. Barely looking at each other. Barely speaking a word. But when it came to a reward of any sort, the singular brain cell they both shared never grew rusty.

Aqua didn't seem to pay any mind. He'd long given up on the both of them. He won't be suprised if they develop diabetes by the age of thirty in all honesty.

He folds the paper neatly and tucks it in his pocket, before turning to his siblings. " We'd better go now then. Can't waste time, and you know how Miyako-san gets when she's mad."

Immediately both Beryl and Ruby freeze. The last incident still fresh in their mind, after all....

*For Beryl, he felt he was being bored to death.*

*For Ruby, it was getting thrown out the window--*

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It was awkward, terribly awkward. From the walk to the bus stop, to getting dropped off at the next stop, and then heading to the supermarket. It was all so horribly awkward. The silence was suffocating for the triplets.

But during the whole trip to get here, Ruby was thinking deeply about all of this. Maybe this was her chance to find her answer. And Aqua secretly thought the same. Perhaps now was indeed a good time to search for that answer.

For Beryl, however, he didn't bother trying to decipher the strangeness of Miyako's timing with her letter, nor the small glances Ruby has sent to him from time to time as if she were studying him or hesitating on what to do. His mind was too focused on trying to pinpoint where the other stares were coming from, maybe he could finally spot one of those stalkers and use that knowledge as an advantage in the future. He was curious if their gazes will follow them to the grocery store. In an enclosed space like that, it'd be much easier to narrow down suspects.

That's what he told himself at least.

.....

The triplets entered the store. Aqua, ever the initiator, instantly searched for a cart. He told his two siblings to stay near the aisle entrance while he went searching for one. Now more awkwardness ensued as Beryl and Ruby were left alone.

But it was strange. ' Awkward '? Since when was their relationship ever defined as that-- *Oh right.*

Ruby lets a bitter sigh escape her, somewhat finding interest on what aisles contained different items from the many boards hanging across. For someone who wanted to find an answer to this mess, she was certainly not doing a very good job at actually *doing it* to say the least. When was the last time she felt distant from Beryl despite standing right next to him? The thought depresses her.

She....

She wanted nothing more than to just live like normal. Poke fun at him. Make jokes with him. Argue with him. And so much more. But now, with each day that passes, the distance only grows wider--

" Hey, Ruby."

"...?"

Beryl seemed to be pointing at something, and she looked to where exactly he's pointing and--

All she sees is a middle-aged mother pushing one of those carts where there was a kiddie transport at the front, with the kid making car noises as he steered the wheel happily.

" Maybe Aqua should get one of those. You could probably fit." He said, sounding half-serious and half-joking.

Almost instinctively, she slaps his arm, glaring at him. " Do *not* make me get into a scrap with you at a grocery store of all places, Beryl I swear to-- *ah...*? "

She quickly realized what she'd done. Immediately retracting her hand and placing it close to her chest, she reflects. Without even thinking, at the slightest provocation from him, her body had responded on its own. Natural as all the other times. It reminded her of the normal times she was desperately wishing for just seconds ago.... did it really happen as simple as that?

Soon enough, she found herself glancing at Beryl again. *Did he do it on purpose?* She wouldn't be surprised if he did. But it was surprising considering Beryl had not once....

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Suddenly, a strange thought came to her.

Could it be that Beryl felt the same, and decided to break the ice himself...?

Ruby shakes her head. *No, that can't be him!* Or so she insists, despite feeling a little more relaxed now. The thought of Beryl closing the distance first was absurd in her opinion, why would he? This is her job, isn't it? She's supposed to be the one finding the answer here!

Still though.

Purposeful or not. In character of him or not. She felt....relieved. Grasping at that small moment of normalcy again, letting her honed instinct as a Hoshino triplet take over. She was reminded of its importance. Feeling a bit more confident, she shakes away all the nerves, and decides that today she'll break the ice. Ignoring him will never solve the tension, so it's time to figure things out Ruby!

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From the other side of the spectrum, Beryl finds himself surprised with what he'd done. He didn't think he'd make an attempt like that, but the opportunity came and...well...

He feels Ruby's lingering determined gaze on him, and he couldn't find it in himself to look back. She might just end up teasing him again, and annoying him once more as payback. And besides, he silently promised to give them both time to accept or reject him. It's just that he had to give them a little push, because he admits..... *daily life seemed more bleak without their typical antics.*

Ruby wanted to say something, but was interrupted with a loud wheel screeching coming from their behind. Both siblings turned to a more-than-irritated Aqua expression as he tried to push the cart, wincing each time it screeched loudly. It took a couple more screeches until he got to them with an already fed up expression.

"....There were no better carts." He answered the silent question from their blank looks.

Beryl blinks a few times, before shooting up a hand to his mouth. Disguising his chuckle as a cough.

Ruby cracks a smile, amused from seeing the usually calm Aqua becoming frustrated from something trivial like this. *Maturity what?* She refrained from saying aloud, else he'd kill her on the spot (probably).

Aqua sighed, shaking his head before pushing past them....with the screechy cart of course.

Since when did you two get so buddy-buddy again all of a sudden... He thought bitterly as he didn't fail to notice their mockery of him and the cart he chose, which by the way, WASN'T HIS FAULT.

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" Well, first off. Let's start with the easier things to find," Aqua muttered aloud, as he looked down at the note and nodding to himself before looking back at his two siblings. " Let's make this quick you two. I saw the checkout counters and the lines are up in the extremes." It was a Sunday, after all. Weekends are definitely the most busy a grocery store can get in most circumstances.

Beryl and Ruby glance at each other, before nodding to Aqua. Determination written on their faces, as Aqua nodded back and lists off the things each triplet will have to find....

.....

### **First stop: Eggs!**

Ruby nearly crashed into the stack of cartons after sprinting all the way to its area. Breathing heavily, she gets intimidated by the dozens upon dozens of stacked cartons of different types of egg brands.

Let's just get the cheapest one! Was her first thought, lazily reaching for a couple cartons of the cheapest set of eggs and running back to add it to the cart.

But one cold look from Beryl made her take back the eggs to the place she took them from. Grumbling to herself as she recounts his remark...

*" Oh come on! Who cares about the branding! They're just eggs and you always make them good anyway!" She had argued.*

*" They're not just brandings, Ruby. They're stamps of approval from animal well-fare along with a higher nutritional value that's usually best found in-- blah, blah, blah, blah....--and these high quality eggs can compliment my cooking even more, blah blah blah blah....."* She mockingly argued his monotonous voice as she recited his words ( well-- mostly recited ) and finished it off with a scoff and an eye roll.

Anyways, she did as he told her. And picked the right eggs, placing it into the cart.

.....

## ***Number 2: Cereals!***

Beryl hummed as his gaze travels across the two shelves seemingly containing the listed cereals and other breakfast type snacks. The variety stretched from healthy oat-based cereals to downright sugary circles of delights. Beryl has reached out into the inner depths of his memory bank, and snatching a series of brands the household has taken a liking to, and with this retrieved information he immediately picks the frequently eaten cereal brands and places them in the cart.

*Coincidentally, Ruby returns as soon as he did, dropping some cheese, and sauces which were placed on their own separate spaces as to not mix them. She eyed the box of cereals Beryl had chosen and immediately scrunched her face.*

" Where's mine?" She asked.

*Beryl pulls out the sugary circles of delights cereal, and she immediately wore a sick face.*

*" No..." She sighs. " I don't like eating these cereals for the morning anymore, Beryl. They're going to give me diabetes since I have a history of being addicted to this brand.....and they make me fat. And an idol is*

*required to have a nice appealing body!" She huffed.*

*" Sure, that's important and all..." He rolls his eyes, before tapping the sugary cereal box. " But I actually decided to get you this just so you could actually make a 'sweet' personality for yourself. You're quite lacking in that department, I'd say. "*

*Ruby inhales, closing her eyes for a moment.*

*' Peace. Think of peace. Just ignore him. Think of Minami-chan, that sweet, loveable, huggable girl. So sweet that she'd never say the things Beryl says. She'd never get on my nerves. Yes....inner peace.... '*

*Beryl was amused seeing Ruby trying to calm herself down.*

*Ruby exhales, looking to Beryl with a peaceful smile.*

*" You really are a piece of shit, Beryl."*

.....

### **Now we have Aqua with number 3: Produce!**

The older Hoshino triplet hummed to himself a tune of a song from B-Komachi as he peacefully picks out vegetables and fruits and adds them to the cart without so much as a peep from his reverie.

Lost in his own little world as he proceeded to the dairy section....

.....

**But what happens when all three of these forces coincide at a certain part of the store? Let's find out with number 4, then shall we?**



" Aqua, I want that meat! "

" No, Aqua. We should get this meat right here."

" But this meat tastes better!"

" That meat can make you a lot fatter. Besides, what's wrong with my choice of meat? I thought you liked it."

" Oh, c'mon Beryl. It's been a while since we had *this meat*, don't you think?"

"....Unacceptable. My meat is better. We're going with my choice, Aqua."

" Eh?! No! We're going with *my* choice, Aqua!"

As the two bickered ( again ), several people who heard bits of their conversation found themselves feeling second-hand embarrassment, and hurried to their own business.

The woman behind the station counter gulped nervously at the younger triplets bickering, his eyes darting from them and then to Aqua.

" So, uhm, what will it be sir--" She was cut off by two obnoxious voices intervening immediately.

" Aqua, can we please go with mine? "

" Don't listen to her, Aqua. Mine has way more health benefits."

" Nobody cares, Beryl!"

" You're not gonna be saying that once you get a bad check-up one day, Ruby--"

A loud frustrated sigh escapes Aqua, before he turns to them with a dark look.

" Quiet."

Both Ruby and Beryl immediately halted their exchange, as they proceeded to get themselves proper almost instantaneously. The man behind the meat station watched in shock as the older triplet effortlessly threatened his younger companions to shut up ( at last! ), it brought peace in the entire supermarket, the other shoppers sending Aqua thankful looks since some have children accompanied with them, they could finally uncover their ears from Ruby and Beryl's rather suggestive conversation.

Aqua eyes them again as a warning, before promptly turning his back on them once more. Releasing a deep sigh, he points to a few of the selection from the window.

*" I'll take some salmon, the leanest cut of beef you have, and some chicken as well...."*

Beryl and Ruby looked at him suprised. It seems their big brother has ordered both of their recommendations...

Ruby beamed brightly, stepping up to Aqua and nudging his arm calling him a '*tsundere*'.

" You're such a tsun-tsun, Aqua~!"

Beryl, of course, takes part in the teasing as well. Nudging him from the other side.

" Aqua, I didn't think you've grown so soft on us."

Aqua's eye twitches in irritation. Maybe he should make a special order where he asks the guy from the counter to cut his siblings up into prime cuts instead.

~~~~~

" Well, that's just about it."

An hour flew by, and at last, the quest was finished. Everything was crossed out on the list, marking its completion. Despite the ruckus Beryl and Ruby constantly found themselves in, they still got their jobs done anyhow. But if you ask Aqua.....next time, he'd rather do the shopping alone if need be.

" Let's hurry up, the line must be long." Aqua ushers the cart quickly towards one of the checkout counters, Beryl and Ruby trailing behind.

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Dear god it was long.

An estimate of 50-60 people in waiting....on each respective counter. It was crazy. This was all a battle of endurance and one's utmost patience. The Hoshino triplets were at least slotted in as the 31st of the line, but there were several people ahead of them with bigger grocery carts to checkout, so the line could take hours.

Aqua tapped the cart, impatiently. He now understands why some people just end up stealing. It's a quicker solution than to just wait here in suffering, but he advises himself against that still. After all, getting in trouble with the law goes against his goals, it could delay him.

Meanwhile, Ruby decided to use Beryl as her free wall, leaning against his sturdy back while she fiddled with her phone. Beryl didn't seem to mind this time as he also tried browsing through his

phone in order to distract himself.

It was silent, sufferingly silent.

Until Ruby's eyes light up, seemingly having remembered something.

Poke!

Poke!

Poke!

Beryl snaps his attention away from his phone and looks to Ruby.
" What?"

" Miyako-san said we can get anything we want once we finished the list, remember?" She whispered.

" I already got what I want," He pointed to the ice cream container chilling in the cart.

Ruby pinches his arm. " You didn't remind me?!"

" You never asked." He blandly replied. *It wasn't his fault that she was just naturally forgetful at times now is it?*

Ruby pouts, the puffs of her cheeks looking like they were about ready to explode. Beryl sighs and places his phone back in his pocket.

" Well, what exactly do you want?" He offers to fetch it for her.

" Pudding package, thank you~!" She smiles brightly. Beryl rolls his eyes, though he really did like Ruby's smile. (He's never admitting that though.) since it reminded him of their mother.

He proceeds to inform Aqua about his extra mission, to which the latter gives him an understanding nod. " Just don't take too long....."

He'd tiredly muttered.

.....

Beryl felt....better today. A lot better.

It's not like things are completely fixed yet. He knows they still have much to talk about, but for what it's worth, this is the most normal he's felt in a while. Without needing to 'act' the part like he's been doing, he's just living it like he always did. Needless to say, fooling around with Aqua and Ruby certainly revived his sanity, even if it's a bit.

And throughout the entire day, he had not once sensed a single presence from those that followed him.

He arrives to the many cooler stations and immediately tries to search for Ruby's favorite dessert; pudding. His eyes scan each station until eventually he finds the cooler that contained the pudding packages, he speed walks to get there and sticks his hand in the chilly domain.

He grabs the nearest pudding package--

And so did another's hand.

"Oh, it seems like we both had the same idea." A calm voice said next to him.

Beryl slowly turned his head to the stranger that had his hand on the same package. Red alarms began blaring within as he wondered how he didn't detect this person's presence, he was met with a man of the same height as him, but with the looks of a young adult. His eyes a sharp emerald, and his mostly covered under his hood, a facemask concealing his mouth.

This person...

Beryl's lips remained neutral, his expression that of stone. But his nerves were currently on fire.

He had to stay calm.

He must not panic.

Even if this person went in undetected,

Even when Beryl failed to send his presence earlier,

Even if Beryl was caught off guard for the first time in years.

He must stay calm.

Even with the possibility that this man.....

No...there's no doubt. Beryl remembers those eyes. He's seen them plenty.

"Are you okay, kid?" He calmly asked.

No, he wanted to answer.

Nothing felt 'okay' when you run into a White Room student.

~~~ **Chapter End** ~~~

...I honestly don't know what to say.

I'm drained from making this chapter, and you know what, it's not even supposed to end like this. ;-;

this 17k word count chapter only contained 50% of what i initially planned to be here. So yes, this was supposed to be MUCH longer. But now I'm kinda too stressed out to complete it all in one go so i just went ahead and separated it to two parts. For my own sanity.

Man, what a shame. I really did want to fit everything here but....each word being added was making me anxious. Hopefully you can understand, like always. I wanna produce the best chapter every time but it's tough on me mentally lmao.

But shit this was supposed to be my best chapter yet had I gone through the original plan but....I suppose I'll make up with it somehow with the next release. I just gotta readjust some things to still bring out the hype the way I wanted it to.

Hopefully you enjoyed this chapter anyhow!

Hope you found the Hoshino triplet chaos fun because I personally enjoyed writing it the most. It was...the least stressful part of this entire chapter I'd say :)

Next chapter I'll bring out my A-game, I swear! I'll take another long break and then publish another long ( this time, fulfilling ) chapter for you guys.

See you~

## 10.5. The Hoshino Bonus!

Heya, it's Lumine here!

It's been a while ( an entire damn month actually-- ) since I updated. I wanna apologize for that. I've just been so busy, and my energy these days just get sapped out. I barely have any reserves for writing. Even during the weekends I'm STILL doing school work in advance cuz I promised to put myself on an academic grind this year...

( Which paid off actually cuz I've been on time with my submissions and i've gotten pretty good scores on recent quizzes! )

So yeah.... I haven't been writing much. Occasionally I get some bit of freedom here and there, which I use to put a few words in for the next chapter of this fic. But I don't wanna spend too much time on wattpad, I have to use the majority of that small freedom to attend for my relationships in my personal life yk?

These days I truly feel like a walking zombie, but I've never felt better at the same time. Which is weird. But it is what it is.

I got some freedom here to write....but the actual chapter is far from ready yet. I'm not even gonna sugarcoat it with you all. It's probably gonna take another month-- maybe even LONGER. Everything is just so hectic so I can't really quicken my pace when my mind is all out of batteries each day I get home....so sorry again about that ;-;

But I thought I'd at least upload a short chapter. A filler chapter that explores more of the Hoshino triplets moments, taking place before the big reveal of Beryl's past identity as Kiyotaka.



These little snippets have just been sitting in my thoughts for far too long! It's time I make it canonical for the fic.

Hopefully, however short this is, I'm hoping you guys can enjoy it either way!

Ah, but don't expect any of my usual standard writing in this short chapter. Expect a lazier or more casual writing style for this one, since the content are just canonical snippets I can only implement in filler.

~~~~~

1. Blanket.

(Takes place when the triplets are in middle school)

Aqua: * *Sees Ruby sprawled on the couch, sleeping peacefully, without a blanket.* *

He frowns before sighing and fetching one from the drawers. He walks back into the living room and then drapes the comfortable fabric over her sleeping figure as gentle as he can without waking her up. After finishing the deed, he patted Ruby's head, eliciting a hum of contentment from the young girl.

From the corner of the room, Beryl watched silently.

.....

On another day,

Aqua: * Sees Beryl asleep on the couch without a blanket *

It was late at night, and Aqua wondered for a moment why Beryl was even there. But he decides not to question it and fetched him a blanket without another word.

He arrived back into the room and proceeded to drape the blanket over Beryl this time around. Gentle as usual, so as not to wake him up. Though Beryl has always possessed more apparent instincts than both of his siblings, Aqua had become accustomed enough to know exactly how to do things without waking him unintentionally. So he hummed a song their mother always hummed when she put them to sleep, and as if it were magic, it worked in making sure Beryl stayed asleep. (Or at least, Aqua assumed so)

Like usual, after finishing the job, he pats Beryl gently.

From the kitchen counter, a pair of eyes peeked, it was Ruby's.

.....

One day, Aqua sat on the couch. Seemingly doing nothing this time around, which was quite unusual for him. He was always doing something, after all. Whether that be homework or another deciphering lead to find out just who was the man responsible for taking away their mother; the hunt for their father still burning in his mind....

But....

This time around, he decides to not think too much about the usual. Instead letting his mind linger into a faraway memory...

.....

It was midnight at the time. The lights were off, and the three siblings were nestled against each other on the couch with the only source of light and white noise coming from the TV. If Aqua recalls correctly, they'd been watching a movie at the time as per Ruby's request, using this as a chance to stay late and wait for Ai's arrival.

But Ai didn't come home for a long while. And eventually, both her and Beryl simply fell asleep. Aqua was a bit tired himself, so he was trying to drift off to sleep as well, already closing his eyes.....until he heard the opening and closing of their entrance door. And a womanly sigh that followed. It didn't take another second to guess as to who that was. So Aqua didn't bother opening his eyes.

Next, came her approaching footsteps. He could imagine her expression. She must've found her babies' position on the couch absolutely adorable and is tortured with the temptation to snap a picture. It was a 50/50 whether or not she submitted to that temptation, but it didn't matter. It was Hoshino Ai, after all. She was bound to do whatever it is that she desired.

Then he began hearing her approaching further, till' he could literally feel her presence standing in front of them. Aqua was tempted to pry his eyes open to gaze upon the wonderful idol, but he refrained for whatever reason. He can hear her soft hum as she patted each of the triplets' little heads with affection in her touch. It stuck like that for a while, and Aqua wanted to lean into her palm further but she retracted her hand a second later.

She abruptly stopped humming her little song.

"....Hm? "

He immediately stills. Oh crap. Did she find out? Ah, he supposes this was predictable from the start. He couldn't just fake his obvious admiration for Ai, let alone fake sleep, when all he really wanted was to see her face after a long day of absence.

But just as he opened his eyes, he saw a blanket being draped over the three of them. Her humming resumed as she patted down the fabric evenly. Aqua found her so beautiful with the light of the TV shining the purple strands of her hair, like a moonlight glazing her skin, and accentuating her charming eyes.

Then he was met with those eyes staring right at him, a splash of silent surprise, before a small smile graced her lips.

" Shhh..." She signaled him to keep quiet. She didn't want to wake up the other two from their sleep.

Aqua could do nothing but nod along in silent agreement. He'll do as she says and try to go back to sleep this time. Besides, he'd seen what he wanted to see. Her face. After a long day's absence.

Yeah....he could try sleeping for real now. So he closed his eyes and relaxed.

But not before hearing a final whisper,

" Good night, Aqua."

.....

He....truly wished times were like back then.

When she was still here.

When....things were still okay.

.....

He missed her, truly.

.....

.....

.....

Those were his last thoughts before falling asleep, hoping to enter once more to that sweet memory....

Two pair of eyes spied on the older triplet. One pair of Ruby's, and the other pair of Golden brown. They shared a look with each other before nodding and fetching a blanket.

.....

The two younger siblings sat on opposite sides of Aqua. Beryl threw the blanket in the air and Ruby caught the other side, before slowly settling it on the three of them without waking up the slumbering Aqua.

The two of them looked to each other, sharing a silent conversation with their eyes alone.

Aqua had always draped a blanket over them when one of them slept on the couch without one. He always gave them some warmth before his own. Ruby thought it was a good idea to give back, and Beryl agreed with her too.

So it's like this.

Just like back then, huh.

The three of them nestled against each other on the couch. But this time, it was the two younger siblings who draped the blanket over their tired older brother. Sure, it wasn't the same as their mother's, but the meaning of it all hadn't changed.

Ruby smiles.

Beryl smiles a bit too.

They both pat Aqua's head before eventually drifting off to sleep themselves, but not before muttering.

" Good night, Aqua."

.....

Unfortunately, had they stayed awake a bit more to notice....

They would've seen that the sleeping Aqua was smiling too.

~~~ Chapter End ~~~

So, that was it for the short sweet chapter! Hopefully u guys enjoyed it.

Again, Im sorry for the delay. But I want to make sure the next chapter is done correctly and up to my standards. So far I could only put 3k words in, so it's really going to take a while due to my own schedule.....so bear with me, I beg you.

I'll make sure it's worth it! So stay tuned...

**For the Next Chapter: The End of the White Room**

**Yes, I am not joking. That's the title. Why did I reveal it?  
Hmm....who knows? Just felt like it!**

**Anyway....**

**See you then~**

# 11. The End of the White Room.

*"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will."*

**- Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre***

~~~~~

The eyes of a white room student were easily identifiable.

Calculating, aware, and observing....

This person's emerald orbs portrayed those three elements found in the average white room student without need for doubt. But these particular set of eyes seemed to hold something else behind them....a deep anger, resentment, and something Beryl could likely define as hatred.

" Are you okay?" The person had asked with faux worry in his tone.

Beryl wondered how this can escalate based on his response. Would it turn violent, and if so, could he win? There's something strange about this person. He doesn't *feel* like the average white room student....he feels more akin to that of a fourth generation product. But that wouldn't make sense. If he really did come from the fourth generation, Beryl should easily recognize him. Sharp green eyes and brown hair mostly covered by the shelter of his hoodie, he looked to be around the same age as Yuki, potentially speaking.

It irked him to know that he failed to sense his approaching presence. Beryl had never once let that happen before, was it because he let his guard down this time around? No, that can't be it. Something was off about this individual, despite clearly being a white room student, Beryl can't discern the man's intentions. But the dormant anger is evident from his eyes.

He should back away.

" ...Ah, maybe you're mad that we reached for the same thing." The man came to a strange epiphany, a smile dressing his lips as he lends the pudding package to my direction. " In that case, I don't mind if you take this."

It might be a bait. Beryl can't be too trusting here. He needs to get out of his way.

" No, it's fine. You can--" But before Beryl could politely reject the offer, a loud voice called from behind him.

" Beryl! What's taking you so long!" The tone of his obnoxious ' older ' triplet sister had cut him off.

Damn it, Ruby.

This isn't the time, Beryl mentally cursed as he snapped his head towards her approaching figure. Upon seeing that she caught his attention, she quickly jogged over to where he was, with a pout on her face and her arms crossed.

" Aqua's nearing the register. Did you get the pudding I asked?" She asked, impatient.

" Ruby--"

" Oh, do you mean this pudding?" The voice of a kind gentleman interjected. Ruby seemed confused, while Beryl visibly tensed up.

The young girl peeked to the side of Beryl's tall body, and then

spotted the man wearing a dark colored hoodie and a face mask, his eyes and portions of his hair being the only thing visible from his face.

" Oh," Ruby widened her eyes before shooting Beryl a grin. " Is this one of your pals from school?" She jabbed.

" He's way too old to be my ' pal '. " Beryl jabbed back.

" I'm right here, ya know..." The stranger reminded, though a chuckle of amusement escaped him. He didn't seem offended at all, at least from Ruby's point of view.

Beryl was still rather on edge.

" Sorry, um....so....do you know my brother or something?" Ruby steps in front, causing alarm to blare within Beryl's body as his eyes snapped to her instantly.

" No, I don't." The person shook his head. " We actually grabbed the same package by coincidence, and I asked if he'd like to take it instead. I wouldn't have minded. He's still a youngster after all." He kindly clarified the situation to Ruby.

" Also, I overheard from your short conversation. Did you send him on an errand for the pudding? Would you like to take it then, miss...?" He offered again, this time to Ruby.

Ruby smiled, the guy seemed nice and he was offering to give her the pudding package she liked so much. She would be a fool to refuse, no?

" Sure! Thank you very--"

" No, there's no need." A sharp voice interrupted her, and so did the strong grip that latched onto her wrist and pulled her back.

Huh? Ruby blinked in suprise. She looked down to her wrist where it was being gripped by Beryl's hand, she looked up to him ready to complain but froze immediately upon seeing the dark look on his face.

" Are you sure?" The stranger raised a brow.

" Yes, we don't mind. We can get other brands." Beryl curtly answered.

A cold silence slowly fell upon them, mostly due to Beryl's insistence. Ruby feels her throat turning into dry ice from this coldness from Beryl, she wondered why he was acting this way, and to this stranger no less. He didn't seem like a bad person, did he?

" I see..." The man nods in understanding, " In that case, I'll get out of your hair now, kid."

He waved the two goodbye before turning around and walking away with the pudding package in hand. Beryl didn't train his eyes away from the person's back, still suspicious of what he might pull. But it's not likely he'd do anything drastic now that Ruby is here to act as witness, it'd be too risky for him to have tried anything but.... it was still entirely possible that he might've done something regardless of Ruby's presence or not. She was in danger just now, and she didn't know any better.

He must've been sent to act as a spy, Beryl surmises. It's plausible.

But why would they send a student in place of a professional?

No....

The better question to ask himself should be the fact he couldn't sense that student's approach. Has the White Room since then produced more efficient results after his passing? Or was it just the limits of this new body. It's not conditioned the way his past life used to be, so it could answer the question....though not completely.

Again, he could feel it. That stare which bore holes behind the back of his head. A stare he could never shake off no matter how much he wanted to--

" H-Hey, Beryl, could you let go now?" The voice beside him halted further thoughts. " You're kinda hurting me-- ow!"

Beryl blinked once before letting go of her wrist, he slowly turned his head to Ruby. A look of concern spreads across his face almost immediately upon seeing the way Ruby tried to relieve the strain he placed on her wrist.

"....Ruby--" Before he could apologize, she used her good hand and put a stop to anything he was going to say. " I'm fine!" She insists, but a look of worry accompanied her as she asked. " Are *you* fine?" She prodded.

" " Truthfully, he wasn't. Not at all. That person from earlier, he ticked Beryl off. He's certain they come from the same place.....but his identity is not recognizable at all to Beryl. He's certainly not someone from the Fourth Generation, but somehow he feels like one. Did his father really kickstart a new batch with the same curriculum like he initially theorized?

Seeing Beryl's complicated look made Ruby worried, so she tugged his sleeve to try and snap him out of that trance-like state, and it worked. He blinked again in realization before answering her previous question with a small nod. But that alone didn't satisfy her curiosity.

" Beryl do you...recognize that person?" She asked him with a glint in her eyes.

It was a normal question to ask, of course. Seeing someone close to you so rattled by what seemed to be a stranger's presence is something that would call for her concern, it's normal to ask that, he knows that but.....he also knows that this isn't just some ordinary question. She's trying to pry further into his past, because she's well aware of its exposition that'd been revealed by Yuki on live television. But Beryl can't sense any ill intentions from her end, she was asking from both curiosity and her concern, he guesses....she wants to understand him more.

" No," But he doesn't intend to share more than she needs to know. Leaving the past life behind and keeping the past away from his current one was his priority. Keeping Ruby safe is his promise. " He just had a bad vibe to him, that's all. "

Lying outright wouldn't help his situation, so he just kept it vague.

" Oh...I see..." Ruby nodded, and took his response as his way of brushing her off. But she couldn't seriously deny his words either, Beryl has always had this strange sense of identifying a dangerous presence. Ruby's had her fair share of creepy guys acting nice to try and get closer to her, but Beryl was always there to step in between and scare them off. *But then again.... he does the same thing to people she genuinely thinks is nice. (?)*

" Sorry we couldn't get the brand you wanted, but..." Ruby realizes then that Beryl had presented her another brand of pudding cups she really liked. " Will this do?" He asked.

Looking to the pudding cups in his arms, and then to his calm face. She thought this was his poor attempt of trying to dissuade her, she wondered if this is all he's going to do. Live in denial. And then she wondered, if she were in his place, would she have done the same thing too? Most likely.

So she tries to smile, she's great at smiling!

" Alright, good enough." She said. She was a bit disappointed though, it really didn't seem like Beryl was intent on opening himself up to her or Aqua with how he reacted to that person and then to her question a moment ago. She thought everything was going to be okay but....

No, don't think so negatively now, Ruby. Everything is going to be okay. I've just gotta try harder! She assures herself. She's determined to figure it out within herself, to decide, just who does she see when she thinks of this person in front of her. Beryl or Kiyotaka.

Beryl nods before his eyes trail itself to her wrist again. She picks up on that and smiles gently, she's certain that at this moment though-- this is Beryl, her brother.

" I'm okay. So stop wearing that gloomy look on your face, little brother." She assures him.

It took a moment for her words to sink in, before he responded.

" I wasn't worried about your wrist, just so you know." A familiar upturn of his lips presented itself on his face. " I'm more worried about all this pudding you made me get. You're going to get diabetes by the time you turn 30, Ruby. And that's *if* you're lucky it

doesn't get you anytime below that."

Oh this little--

" Like you're one to talk! You'd be perfectly content if you had ice cream everyday for all three meals, I'm suprised you're even still alive!" She barked back.

Beryl seemed amused before turning around and getting in the last word, " Start jogging one of these days, you're going to be too fat for an idol after all this fatty pudding."

" HOW DARE YOU SAY TO YOUR SISTER--!"

And so, the siblings' antics resume.....

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.

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Meanwhile...

" *I'm going to kill them both...*" Aqua muttered under his breath as he was literally about to put the items on the conveyer belt. The older Hoshino triplet twitching his eye as he prayed for the person before him to slow down on his checkout until his younger siblings get their asses back here--

~~~~~

After a short filling brunch, the three rushed to take the subway to get back home as soon as possible to drop off the groceries, before Aqua and Beryl are supposed to go off to their afternoon set.

*Zzz....Zzz....Zzz....*

Soft snores filled the silent train ride. It was full of people, but as per Tokyo's natural etiquette, conversations didn't typically happen in the train or at the very least were kept discreet as to not bother other passengers.

*Zzz....Zzz....Zzz*

Whilst hugging the lightest grocery bag to her chest, it was Ruby who had fallen asleep and was making all these soft snores. Aqua and Beryl obviously took initiative in handling the heavier ones, though Beryl did think it'd be funny to have Ruby carry all this by herself while he and Aqua head off to the set..... *but Miyako would certainly give his ear a good nagging if that were to happen...*

The train suddenly bumped a bit, causing Ruby's head to fall neatly on Beryl's shoulder. Still asleep. Beryl doesn't move for a moment, instead he glances at her, and then decides to shift his position just a teeny bit so she wouldn't strain her neck. He wasn't doing this because he cared for how she'll ache when she wakes up.... it was simply because....admittedly, he felt a little guilty still from earlier....

*Speaking of which, what happened ' earlier ', still bothered him...*

More specifically, that person.....

Just who is he...?

" Seems like you and Ruby have gotten closer again."

The silent contemplation was shattered by none other than his older brother, Aqua, who seemed to eye both Ruby and Beryl with a discerning expression.

"...I guess so." Beryl answers, softly. " Thought I'd have to wait a few more weeks. Maybe even months." *Years, possibly.* He refrained from saying.

" It's Ruby." Aqua says, as if he just gave an incredibly simple answer to a complicated equation. But he didn't need to elaborate

further, since Beryl of all people would understand what he meant. And he did.

*Ruby was far too impatient to keep up a cold shoulder. They both knew.*

Even if she didn't get to have that talk with Aqua a while back in order to clear up her feelings once and for all. Eventually, she would have made the first move to reach Beryl on her own. Just like she did before. She's just that type of person, so pure, so kind, so....innocent in heart. Honest to a fault.

But in the triplets dynamic, she was the strongest glue in there keeping them together.

*Zzz.....Zzz.....Zzz.....*

And the girl in question slept, unaware, of all this.

.....

"What about you?" Beryl decided to ask.

"....What about me?" Aqua asked back, but Beryl knew this was just him being avoidant.

"How do you feel about all of this? After finally knowing my identity." Beryl was straight to the point this time. Feeling a bit more confident to break the ice himself after Ruby's initiative.

"..."

Aqua no longer faced him. Instead his eyes found interest in the grocery bag he clutched tighter to his chest the longer he kept the silence.

"....I don't know, Kiyotaka."

"....Ah..."

Beryl didn't push the question further. And so, the rest of the ride



remained in silence.

*Zzz....Zzz....Zzz....*

~~~~~

" I.....want to quit LoveNow..."

" What?!"

Sumi Yuki's words shocked all the other candidates, it took a few seconds for them to process-- to believe that she really just said that. In that span of a few seconds they may have even considered it to be a horrible joke from her part...but....they ended up believing her tears, which drizzled down from her eyes. That, she in fact, was not lying.

Or so it seemed. Beryl thought.

" A-Are you serious...? In the middle of the season too!" Morimoto exclaimed in suprise.

" Why would you say such a thing, Yuki...?" Noboyuki asked, his tone easing its way to heartbreak. After all, it was he who had the closest relationship to the girl.

Sumi sighs, turning around to face the window with tense shoulders. A few seconds passed before she finally begun her explanation, " Well...the boys at school have been teasing me, lately. Saying things like, " Ah, so you like that kind of guy " and then talking behind my back..." She said, sadly.

This immediately garnered sympathy from the others, knowing exactly where this was going.

" Nothing's scarier than showing your own romantic feelings in front of the whole world..." Sumi said, breathily. Clutching her own arms, as if the room just got colder. But more so, her nerves. " I didn't understand that fear until starting on the show....but now I

get it. And it's....a horrible feeling. Having all people's eyes on you isn't just full of roses."

" I...understand you. I make a fool of myself back in my channel, so I get what you mean." Mem-Cho says with a downcast look.

Sumi was like a new born deerling when it comes to understanding what that fear means. But Mem-Cho, who has a youtube channel, with hundreds and thousands of followers all keeping track of her every move. She of all people would be used to that feeling the most.

" Y-You're really going to quit?" Kurokawa began to interject with gentle concern spread across her features.

" I'm always willing to lend an ear, okay! If you leave, then I'll leave too!" Noboyuki suddenly proclaimed, his passion would surely radiate on the screen.

Beryl panned the camera at a better angle, because right now, the best scene to capture are the expressions of both Sumi and Nobu. Nobody else.

" Nobu-kun..." Sumi was suprised, gently wiping away her tears as Noboyuki continued. " Don't say that stuff anymore. Let's stick with it. I'll be with you the rest of the way, Yuki-chan."

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She stared at him for a moment, her lips trembling, and her resolve hanging by the edge...

" I...."

This would certainly have the audience nearly falling off their seats. The drama was too good.

But Beryl knows that in this type of format, this is also when the episode would eventually...

....Be left on a cliffhanger.

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" Wow, how's it gonna turn out? "

" She'll probably really quit, right? After all, Yuki seems like a sensitive person..."

" But what would happen with Nobu-kun, then? On another note, gosh, isn't he so loyal? Such a green flag!"

" Uggghhh, I can't wait for the next episode! "

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" Look, look! There's now an article about it!" Sumi excitedly jumped with her phone in hand, showcasing the said article to her fellow colleagues. " Think I helped in drawing more viewers?" She asked them.

" Yeah, probably." Aqua blandly answered after checking the article for himself. He admits it was a fine move on her part. That earned a collective nod from the majority.

Everyone can admit that it was a fine move on her part. However...

" So, you're going to quit the show, Sumi-san?" Kurokawa meekly asked, her expression still worried.

It seems Kurokawa Akane took that as genuine.... Aqua notices immediately.

" She can't exactly do that, Kurokawa." Beryl answers just as Sumi was about to utter her response. All eyes turn to him as he continued to add, " She likely has a contract in place from her agency that prevents that. Unless there's an important reason to pull her out of the project, she stays."

" Heh, you got that right." Sumi smiles, nodding. " It's as he said. I couldn't just decide on my own if I want to leave or not. And what I did earlier was nothing but--"

" An act?" Kurokawa blurted out.

Sumi immediately raises her hands in defense, hastily correcting her. " W-Well, er-- I can't exactly call that acting! I'm no actress like you are, Kurokawa-san. I can't even act! You see, I was just...hm....playing my feelings, is all!" Her smile slightly lowers. " It is true that I really did feel sad after being teased at school, though. And at some point I really have thought about quitting but.....contracts are contracts."

And then a yawn escapes her. " Plus, don't we got to film early tomorrow? I'm pretty tuckered out after pulling a stunt like that...." She said.

Mem-Cho chuckles. " Ah, I see. So you were just exaggerating what you were actually feeling."

Kurokawa blinks for a moment, registering Sumi's explanation, before deciding to immediately begin jotting this new information on her notepad. " Exaggeration, huh..." She muttered to herself.

Aqua looks at Kurokawa for a moment as she began writing down notes and humming to herself nonchalantly. After spending so much time with the crew on set, he's finally begun to have an understanding of what goes around in this show. The reality show's version of a movie format's " three actors " method that'd been taught to him by the director, long ago when he was still a child.

There are characters like Sumi and Mem-Cho, who're skillfull with their public image and status. Knowing what acts to do, what words to say, and how to look when doing or saying it.

Then there are characters like Noboyuki. Not exactly special in most aspects, and usually completely genuine with himself. But perhaps that's what gives him that ' distinct ' persona that attracts people's attention nonetheless. Aqua's more or less confident he's under this category too.

And moving on to the very latter of the three..... characters like Kurokawa's and Morimoto. Characters that don't come across well

on TV. He's seen the comments regarding their presence so far, and most of the criticism was directed towards their lack of initiative and bland-ish personality.

Morimoto doesn't seem to mind.....but Kurokawa....she's.... Aqua narrows his eyes in concern. Despite being one of the more bland characters on TV, she's still the one clearly putting in the best effort she can among the other cast members including himself. Always taking down notes, speaking with the director, and then slowly incorporating what she's learned through the set scenes. But it's just blatantly clear that the format of Reality TV doesn't suit the actress at all. And so she struggles, and it's likely she's going to continue to struggle.

And then he glances to Beryl, who glances back at him. Once again, without the need to actually talk, they've both reached the same conclusion on the matter. But things were slightly different now after that.....revelation. Aqua truly doesn't know what to feel about Beryl.....at least, that's what he believes.

.....

" Hey, Akkun!" Aqua felt an arm being slung across his shoulders, the added weight causing him to look slightly irritated but he pretends just enough to not let it show. He turns his head to the culprit, Noboyuki.

" How about we go grab something to eat after we're done?" The dancer suggested, catching everyone else's attention. Gleaming interest in their eyes as well. But Aqua sighs and answers, " Nah, I'm good. I've got food at home."

" Oh come on, don't be boring~" Noboyuki huffs in disappointment from Aqua's answer.

Just wait till' you kids become actual adults..... you'll soon discover the true meaning of what it's like to choose ' food at home ' above everything else.... Aqua still maintained the conservative mindset his past adult incarnation cursed him with.

" Yes, how about you reconsider! Let's take this as a chance to get to know each other better without being stalked by cameras all day." Sumi nudges. " Everyone should go, no?"

Morimoto quietly nods with a smile in agreement. Kurokawa didn't seem against it either.

" If that's the case then I'm expecting Noboyuki to be the one treating everyone to Yakiniku then?" Aqua sends him a pointed glance. The receiver of that glance immediately backing away.

" Ah...well--"

" I elect Mem-Cho to be given that honor." Beryl loudly spoke up, raising his hand.

" Eh?!" Mem-Cho choked on her saliva upon hearing that. " Excuse me, but why me?!" Her cutesy voice cracked for a second.

Beryl smirks.

Aqua immediately recognized what that smirk meant, and mentally sighs.

Mem-Cho, what did you do.... He wondered for her sake.

" Well, if I recall correctly, didn't you receive an increase in your subscriber count lately? You've been riding high, especially when you split the profits 50-50 with your agency. " Beryl recounts, and watches eagerly as Mem-Cho stares at him in horror.

And suddenly, she remembered his words...

" Let me call you Goldy! " There was once a girl, oh so foolish, and oh so young, when she had decided to confront a monster.

" Just know I'll get you back for this. Seven-fold, that is." He promised with a cold air around him. His gaze piercing right through her. But she only smiled in response, unknowing of the consequences that waited for her.

" Goldy it is then~!" She oh so foolishly said without another care in the world.

" You split 50-50 with your agency?" Kurokawa perked up in astonishment. " I only get 80-20 from mine...." She muttered.

Gah! An arrow was shot through Mem-Cho's heart from that remark. Kurokawa was unintentionally guilt tripping her! Damn it, that pure girl!

With Kurokawa's unintentional guilt tripping and Beryl's knowing evil grin, as well as everyone's expectant gazes falling upon her....

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[Mem-Cho concedes.]

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" Alright! Another top-grade assorted platter comin' up!" Mem-Cho exclaimed as she began typing it down on the ordering tablet with vigor.

" Eat your fill, damn brats!" She yelled.

" Wohoo!" Everyone cheered.

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" Was this really necessary?" Aqua asked his younger brother, incredulously.

Beryl nods as he takes in another tender piece of meat into his mouth. Aqua sighs, shaking his head.

" I don't know what Mem-Cho did to deserve your wrath earlier, nor am I willing to *wanna* know at all. But I do have to ask..." Aqua narrows his eyes. " Couldn't we have just went home? There's food in the fridge, we literally just bought the groceries today." He said.

Beryl gives Aqua a blank look.

" It's Ruby's turn to cook this Sunday." He simply said.

Aqua's eyes widened a bit, before coughing into his sleeve awkwardly in defeat. " Ah....point taken then." He simply replied. Not much needed to be said after that statement, it was a well-known fact between the two that Ruby is completely hopeless in the kitchen. ( *No matter how much the girl insists otherwise.* )

Even if every Sunday the three of them agreed to get together and eat at the dining table, with a rotation schedule for the person who'll be cooking that night. And since it landed on Ruby.....then Aqua supposes tonight's decision to eat out with the others, is a lot more justified now. Neither Beryl nor Aqua have no plan on reliving the past trauma of eating whatever horrible frankenstein-eldritch creation Ruby makes as ' food '.

" Aqua-san, this flap meat is done grilling." A gentle voice, coming from the blue haired girl sitting across him, interrupted his thoughts and brought him back to real-time. He watches as she places the perfectly grilled piece of meat onto his bowl.

He sighs at her actions. " Kurokawa-san, I can grill my own meat. You don't really have to do it for me, besides, have you eaten yet? I've yet to see you take a single bite." He asked her.

" Well, actually--"



Before Kurokawa was able to give him a reply, Beryl interjects with a muffled mouthful of food. " *Kurokawa-san mwind gwrilling mwe swome of thwat twoo?*" He asked.

" Beryl..." Aqua sends his brother a glare, to which the latter blatantly ignores. He can't just ask Kurokawa to do something like that so rudely--

" Hehe, alright then, Beryl-san. A fresh batch of grilled flap meat coming right up!" she said, sweetly, before proceeding to grill a couple new pieces.

" I apologize on his behalf," Aqua frowns. " Really, you don't have to grill it for him. He can do it himself--"

" Oh, really, i don't mind." Kurokawa smiles kindly. " And to answer your question earlier; I'm actually a vegetarian. And when it comes to places like these, it's been my policy to never give up the serving role, you know." She said, gripping the metal tongs proudly in her hand.

Aqua raises a brow in slight interest.

She then flips the meat.

" At first, I often got yelled at because I'd burned the meat. But overtime I'd gotten pretty good at grilling now." She said. Aqua hums in response before finally taking a piece of the perfectly grilled flap meat she'd given him a while ago.

*She's earnest,* Aqua thinks.

.....

*5 minutes later...*

.....

" So you see, people these days want to see something more extreme." Mem-Cho randomly yaps, " Well, your options typically depend on how much of a risk you're willing to handle!"

Kurokawa is visibly nodding as she began taking down notes again.

Aqua blankly stares at her.

*She's too earnest*, he thinks.

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" Ohh, Yakiniku, huh? Pretty lavish, isn't it? I bet gazing at all those cuties made the meat extra delicious for you two, huh!"

Ruby gave both her two brothers the stink-eye as soon as they entered the front door.

" Er, I was just socializing." Aqua reasoned. Though, secretly he was happy due to the fact he could eat all those meats and fats without his stomach getting upset now...

" Yeah, the food was amazing." Beryl nods. This affirmation only infuriated the girl.

" I wanna beat the two of you up...."

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" It's been a rule that we all eat together on Sundays..." Ruby muttered with crossed arms.

Aqua was currently washing dishes that Ruby clearly didn't do out of spite. Meanwhile Beryl leaned against the counter and gave Ruby a look.

" With the exception of Sundays where *you'd* be cooking." He points out.

Ruby glares in offense. " Hey! I'm--"

" ' Not that bad of a cook! ', the girl says before she nearly exploded the stove somehow by just trying to cook an egg. " Beryl said, mimicking her voice.

" Oh come on, that was my first time, Beryl!" She reasoned.

" The egg turned black, Ruby. " Beryl narrows. " I don't know how you did it, but you are so bad that it turned blacker than charcoal."

Ruby blushes in embarrassment.

" Maybe if you just stopped recording me and laughing to yourself like a damn witch, you could've HELPED me for god's sake!" She yells back, flustered.

" Alright, alright you two calm down." Aqua, once again, stops the fight. He had just finished washing the dishes and setting them up to dry on the rack. He was currently wiping his hands with a clean towel as he says, " Let's not get into a screaming session in the evening. Miyako-san's going to receive complaints from our neighbours.....again. And you know how she gets."

Ruby huffs, indignant, but obedient. Beryl just shrugs silently.

Aqua realizes in this moment....that he was acting like he used to. Back then, before all the news, here he is acting as their mediator. As if everything was still normal. He felt his heart shrink back for some reason upon realizing just how easy it is to slip back, but he wonders if he should. Honestly, he couldn't determine anything wrong with returning to the same old antics with Ruby and Beryl, even with the latter's background that'd been shown that night. It just felt strange. Confusing. He doesn't how to describe it, but there's certainly a distance that'd never been there before.

" Hey, I was wondering..... the concept of the show is that you guys get together after school, right?" Ruby begins to ask something she'd been curious about since the airing of LoveNow. " But you always film on weekends. Isn't that staged fakery?"

" Can't you let a small detail like that slide? " Aqua proceeds to answer, " Besides, everyone on the show is still a minor in education. I think it's great that they are prioritizing our schoolwork as well. "

" Also, about everything being ' staged '. Suprisingly enough, not all of it was...."

Beryl leaves the two of them to continue their conversation.

.....

He sits on the couch, staring at the TV remote resting on the table. It should be around this time, isn't it? From what he managed to read online, the fourth session of trial was set to be delayed into the evening. *Which is....right about now.*

Beryl grabs the remote, but doesn't turn on the TV just yet. He sat there, silently contemplating on the events of today especially during the morning. That encounter. And now this new update on the court session regarding the case of the White Room. Was this coincidence? It has to be, right? For someone from the White Room to get up close and personal with him, he can't fathom the reason why, besides going into a quick altercation. But in the bigger scheme of things the move still doesn't make sense.

They should be walking on thin ice. Ever since the trial began, Beryl expected the White Room's advancement to slow down. Acting hasty will only increase the risks. And when he thinks about it a little more, there's not much reason for them to still be keeping a close eye on his moves. Beryl's been acting normal for quite a while now, and they'd got nothing to gain from him as far as he was concerned. So either they dialed the surveillance back, or ended it entirely. Moving the focus to Tamako, or just retreating from her too.

And yet....

Something....something doesn't feel right. Beryl thought things were getting better today, but it was the other way around. Things felt off. Come to think of it, ever since they left the supermarket, he hasn't felt any of those gazes that'd been surrounding him for weeks. Which meant nobody, absolutely nobody, was following him. Besides that one person.

Why is that...?

Ding Dong!

Huh?

The sound of the doorbell snapped Beryl from his thoughts, which was then followed by Ruby's voice and rushing footsteps. " *I'll get it!* " He heard her say.

Beryl turned his head to Ruby's approaching figure towards the door, and then time slowed down as his eyes widened in horrific realization. As the world closes in on him, his vision recreates that familiar scene once more, the moment in which the color of blonde flashes into a midnight purple.

' A beat. '

" H-Hey--!" Ruby was forcefully stopped when she felt a tight grip on her arm, pulling her back suddenly.

" Don't." Was all he said. Ruby looks at him in confusion but before she could try and ask him what's wrong, he pulls her behind him even further. Overwhelmed by his strength, she could do nothing but obey to his will. She rubbed her arm in pain, once again, his tight grip hurt her but she didn't dare show it.

She was too distracted....by the cold air surrounding her brother once more.

Beryl...? Ruby was worried. What's with him? Why is he...

Before she could finish that thought, Beryl gripped the knob and twisted. He opens the door and winds his fist back--

" Finally, you opened the-- huh? Beryl? " A woman's figure is what greeted him at the door.

"....Miyako-san?" Beryl paused. He slowly let his arm fall to his side.

Miyako stood there confused, while Ruby immediately pulls Beryl back. Snapping out of her trance just in time and greeting their surrogate mother, " M-Miyako-san! Welcome home! How was work?" She smoothly blurted out within a second.

"" Miyako stares at Beryl with concern, before turning to Ruby and nodding. " I'm alright. Did the three of you eat?"

Ruby huffs, bitterly. " Oh we did. Except these two went out and ate Yakiniiku without me." She rolled her ruby colored eyes, feigning annoyance.

" Is that so?" Miyako chuckles. *Poor Ruby*, she thought. " Where is Aqua? "

" Right here." Aqua finally walks in the entrance hallway. His expression, the usual.

His brilliant blue eyes lingers towards Beryl for a few seconds, before returning focus back to Miyako. " Do you need me for anything?"

" Here," Miyako pushes a plastic bag to his hands with a savory aroma coming from it. " Brought home some snacks. Thought the three of you would like it, as a reward for doing the groceries." she smirks.

Aqua gives a nod in response before heading back to the kitchen and setting it down on a plate.

" Oh...that smelled good." Ruby mumbled. " Don't you think so too, Beryl?" She asked.

"....Mm." he hummed as a response, " Welcome home by the way,

Miyako-san." He releases a sigh of relief. His shoulders turn lax again. And Ruby noticed the cold air around him immediately dispersing, to which she was relieved of too.

But it did still concern her. It was as if Beryl expected someone else from the other side of that door....

Moving hastily like that....had it truly been another person, he would've actually landed that hit.

Miyako nods before reaching out to pat Beryl's head, though she had to extend her arm a lil' bit more than usual because of how tall he is.

Feeling the contact of her hand, Beryl stares at her silently.

" You seem tired, Beryl. Are you sure you're alright?" She probed.

No.

Just now....he thought he was going to relive it again. This time, by his own ghosts.

" I'm alright." He lies. " Just a long boring day of operating a camera, is all."

" I see. Well, just do your best to relax now, okay?" Miyako says before walking past them and making her way to the kitchen. " And maybe eat what I brought! It could help."

" Yeah....thanks." Beryl mutters as Miyako soon exits their vicinity.

"....."

"....."

Now, Ruby and Beryl stood there in awkward silence.

" So....you....uh....did it again." Ruby breaks the ice, chuckling nervously.

" Sorry, I--" He turned to apologize but was met with Ruby

shaking her head.

" It didn't really hurt or anything," She lies. " But....are you really okay? You know...you can tell me what's been bothering you, right?" She takes this as an opportunity to try and grab an answer from him again. She wants to understand.

Beryl sees through the pitiful attempt, and appreciates her gesture but...

" I guess I've just been lacking a lot of sleep lately. I'm not acting like my normal self, right?" He reasons his behaviour on the lack of sleep. He wants Ruby to believe that reason.

" Beryl, please--"

" Ruby, I'm not lying to you. It really is my reason."

" Why won't you--"

" I'll go back to the couch."

" Beryl, you're not--!"

Listening! Ruby couldn't get to the finish as Beryl already began brushing past her. She looks at his back with frustration, any attempt of trying to understand him, trying to reach out to him and close the distance his past has brought to them-- he's pushing her away in all of it! Why is he...

"...Making it so damn difficult..." Ruby heaves a sigh as she muttered that to herself.

Despite how frustrating this is, she could very well at least guess as to why he can't open up about it. Maybe he just really doesn't wanna talk about it because he hates it. Like she does about hers. Whenever she looks back into that life, all she sees is a pitiful version of herself. Maybe...that's similar to what he's feeling too.

But this is Beryl we're talking about. She could definitely be missing the mark here, and it's something a lot more serious. Still, it doesn't give him the right to just ignore all her attempts like this. So she'll just have to try harder. Wait for the perfect opportunity....and then strike!

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Meanwhile, as Beryl sat back on his lonesome. He began to think all sorts of things, or rather concerns regarding his own behaviour just now. He's being driven by shock and desperation, by *emotions*. Now that isn't necessarily a bad thing, rather it's a welcome effect, it's a sign that he's truly mostly departed from his old self but.....*right now, whether he likes to admit it or not, emotions are being a detriment.*

It's clouding his judgement. Pairing emotional tendencies to paranoia is a recipe for disaster. He should've thought things through and realized that it was likely Miyako....but everything felt too horribly familiar. The last time he let his guard down, it costed him dearly. He didn't want to let that happen again.

The White Room is still alive. And the possibility of himself, by fate's whim, of getting involved somehow is still there. When that happens he needs to focus. He can't risk committing mistakes.

.....

He grabs the remote and finally turns on the TV. He switches to the channel where the trial was going to be shown. He needed to see what cards Yuki has brought to the table this time. And then decide on his next moves based on how the proceedings go tonight.

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Yuki wore a stoic expression throughout the 30 minute mark of the trial. She and her adversaries have exchanged evidence, objections, testimonies, and whatnot. Her amethyst eyes watched as the opposing lawyer, operating on Naoe's side, confidently finds

contradictions from her statements and evidence that she placed on purpose to simply prolong the anxious party.

But tonight, she's decided to finally stop the games. Her trump card is only going to be available for so long, she'd rather not withhold it any further than this.

.....

When that lawyer was finished with his counter arguments, the judge narrowed his eyes towards Yuki's position. The woman smiled for the first time since the trial began as she slowly stood up from her seat and politely raised her hand.

" Your honor, if you'll allow me to, I'd like to bring in a vital witness to support my argument in this case. " She formally requests.

The judge gestures with his hand in affirmation. " Go on, Sagami-san. "

As she turns around to face the crowd sitting behind her, she managed to capture eye contact with Ayanokouji Atsuomi for a split-second. His eyes glared at her, trying to pierce itself through her soul like he did so to countless others, but Yuki was simply amused. Excited, even. For what's to come.

" I'd like to call in my wonderful witness! Mika-san, please proceed to the stand." Yuki calls to the entire court.

Atsuomi's eyes widened at the name in panic. *No, it couldn't be. Did she really--?!*

A figure rose from the benches. A woman with dark hair and lifeless brown doe eyes slowly makes her walk to the stand. Atsuomi's lips parting in shock for a moment, but then returned to his stoic expression upon locking eyes with the woman he'd thought he'd never see again after their previous contact. He wondered just what the hell was she doing here. Didn't she escape off the country with a man in tow? Why is she in Japan. Why is she **here**.

Silence shrouded the court as the woman finally got on the stand. A stare down shared to her so called ' ex-husband '. Everyone

present in the room could sense the awful tension radiating from both figures, wondering just what is the connection with this woman.

" May you introduce yourself proper to the court?" Yuki asks.

" I am Ayanokouji Atsuomi's former wife, Mika. And...." The woman pauses hearing the gasps of everyone in the room with the exception of Atsuomi and Yuki, watching Atsuomi's face slowly turn downcast. Upon seeing that, she takes a breath. Feeling awfully.....satisfied, after years of feeling numb. Her mind wondered why that is, but the remains of her heart already knew.

" And...?" Yuki asks her to complete.

*"....Right....I am also the birth mother of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. "*

The judge and the jury looked visibly suprised this time around. They were trained to remain stoic and neutral until proper verdict, but this case was so globally severe that it was hard to maintain that usual countenance, especially when two imposing figures-- the director of the white room and the revered Detective Yuki were practically at war with each other. But it seems like the tides were turning towards Yuki's favor, completely. With the appearance of this woman who claims to be the boy's mother.

" To formally disclose everything. I can indeed confirm without a doubt that Ms. Mika's connection to Ayanokouji Atsoumi as his former wife is indeed a legitimate connection." Yuki walks up to the stand guard, handing the older officer an envelope containing all the files related to her argument. " Will you please give this to the judge? It contains everything I want to say today. The first being, the legitimate previously established marital relationship of these two."

The guard hands over the envelope to the judge, and subsequently the judge proceeds to open it and gazes his eyes upon the first thing he saw; A marriage certificate. Signed by both parties, and witnessed by an official.

The judge nods in understanding. " You may proceed with your point, Ms. Sagami."

Yuki nods and faces Mika again. After she made Mika pledge not

to tell any lies and answer only the truth in front of the jury, she was finally set to begin.

"Ms. Mika. When did you last get in contact with Mr. Atsuomi?" Yuki starts.

" Years ago. A decade or so. After we divorced, we never got in contact again." Mika answers, naturally.

The judge raises a brow as he took out the next file in the envelope, a divorce certificate. Signed. And legitimate like the last.

Yuki nods. " I believe a closer inspection towards you and Atsuomi's past will benefit the court greatly, and so I ask; What was your relationship with him like, exactly?"

Mika hums for a moment, any other day and she would've played with her answer, whimsical like she'd been known to be. But....this was important. After all, why else would she be here taking the young woman's side in this nasty conflict.

" My past relationship with him could be summed up as a contract. A literal one." She says.

" Could you please elaborate further on that?"

" Of course."

Atsuomi grits his teeth as clenches his fists. His eyes not tearing away from the woman as she spoke of their connection with solemnity, all the while continuing to fathom why she stands before him-- *against* him.

" Our first contact was during..." And there she goes. She recounted their first ever meeting, the night at that hostess establishment, when their eyes had first locked. A sense of familiarity being shared between them that night as the both of them held a certain ambition for something, this is what initially piqued Atsuomi's interest in her.

And from thereon, he got to know of her true colors. How greedy and manipulative she can be, but also sentimental. How realistic and diligent she is, while being delusional. She had scammed

several men until she met him-- the first man she felt she couldn't ever pierce through the mentality of.

" A brief recount of what you just told the court; You met Atsuomi at a previous job of yours as a hostess, where you thrived off of scamming many political figures for your own gain. You attempted to do the same to Ayanokoji Atsuomi, but he wasn't one to relent. He saw through you. And it was then that the line of contracts first sparked between you two, and from there he began assigning many tasks private only to you." Yuki recites.

" That is correct," Mika nods.

Atsuomi's breath hitches. He just doesn't understand. But what he does understand is that the Mika standing against him now, isn't the same Mika he once knew. She was here for a reason he can't pinpoint.

" Ms. Mika. What about the White Room, do you know anything of it? Has....Atsuomi ever spoken about it." Yuki was intricate in her words and tone, sending a side-eye glance to the opposing figures and watched as both Jinnosuke and his rich snobby lawyer practically sweated in place.

" I only recall him ever mentioning that....it was a project he valued with his life." Mika sends a glance to the man in question only for a split moment before returning focus back to Yuki. " And he needed my help to be sure it was realized."

" In what way?" Yuki asks, and everyone in the room watched with horrified expressions-- all too knowing of the answer. But if they were to hear it from her....*then they'll see just how dark the tunnel really goes, without any more denial.*

" He asked me to bear him his child."

As soon as the words left her lips, the entire room felt a cold undercurrent. But Yuki didn't dare to let the feeling simmer, as she continued her questioning.

" The child being Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, correct? "

" Correct."

" The same child he sent off to be raised and trained in the White Room," Yuki turns to meet Atsuomi's fierce look. " Among other children he sent off to be trained in that facility as well..."

" O-Objection!" Naoe's lawyer stood up, suprising everyone out of their stupor. To think that this frail guilty looking man who clearly lost the battle would even propose to object the evidence was pitiable.

" Y-Your honor, if I may ask, how can we really trust this woman's words!" He tried to sound composed, but it came as a desperate statement. " For this woman to just suddenly come back to testify against my client of such a horrid crime committed, further convincing everyone that this-- that this hoax is even real. And condemning not just my client but several other people to a dangerous sentence! Is it not suspicious that after all these years...she finally decided to open up?!" His voice boomed through the court.

" That woman.....she doesn't even look like she cares for her own child! Should you really trust the look of a mother who doesn't even care for her own son to come up here in court and make a statement like this? " He continued to reason.

" Are you suggesting that my witness is trying for her ex-husband's defamation?" Yuki raised a brow.

The lawyer glares, seething. Deciding to summon some guts for once as he points at her, " Precisely, Ms. Sagami. The lady you just decided to bring into court today must have a secret motive.....or that you forcefully coerced her into fighting against her ex-husband. Maybe inciting some bitter feelings that don't even relate to the case, and making up this entire backstory to supplement--"

" Then why is it that Atsuomi himself never brought up his wife, not once in these court sessions!" Yuki interrupts brazenly. " if he really *was* innocent, then shouldn't the testimony of someone previously close to him be of use to prove that innocence--?! "

" Order, order!" The judge smacks his gavel against the table, the loud slamming of wood against wood, silencing both parties. As they both turned to face the Judge with apologetic looks. It was silent for a few moments, though both parties clearly have more to say against the other--

But then the voice of the woman in question, broke the silence first.

*"....You are right."*

The tone being emitted from Mika was cold and ruthless. Yuki turns to her, and so did the lawyer. Everyone stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

" I.....never felt love for my son. Let alone consider myself as his mother." Mika admits.

The opposing lawyer's eyes widen, he was close to speak up again, attempting to seize the chance but Mika was quicker.

" It was a deal, your honor." Mika's gaze lands on the conductor of this entire mess of a session. " One last deal that was offered to me by Atsuomi. One last deal before we eventually broke off connections."

" Your honor--" The lawyer tries to speak, but the judge raised his hand.

" Silence." He uttered as he stared the woman down coldly. For him, the case was just downright awful to its core. The more he hears from either side, the more tempting it was to just leave the room. He'd been a judge for a long time now, and he's met with his fair share of horrible crimes. But crimes against children always broke his heart.

He was a father himself.

And to see this woman and that man show no signs of remorse. It disgusted him.

" Continue." Still, he told her. To provide justice, he must endure it. This woman must prove it.

" One last contract was signed. In it was the promise of me

bearing him his child and to act as his wife during that short period. In turn, once the child was born, I would relinquish custody and hand it to him. And I would be rewarded....with 50 million yen."

It was an astonishing confession coming from the mouth of a woman who explained it so inexplicably calm. Everyone watching the spectacle wondered just how tragic the boy's life really was, to be practically sold off to your own father. Abandoned by your mother. And then be subjected into a hellish program under the guise of nurturing talented individuals....

Although Yuki remained stoic about this, her heart certainly ached. Even though she's heard Mika admit it once before. Hearing it again still disturbs her. It reminds her just how heartless a woman she is.....it's comparable to Atsuomi himself. Secretly, she wanted to condemn Mika for her crimes in this as well....but....without her, this wouldn't be possible to do in such a short amount of time.

" Your honor, in the envelope is the original final contract signed by Atsuomi and Mika. The agreement reflecting Mika's confession just now." Yuki announced. " Along with all the other agreements the both of them signed as well.

*The end is approaching.*

Silently, the judge reveals the final item in the envelope. And there it was; a clean white folder with a thick density in its inner. The judge opens it, revealing several contracts signed by Atsuomi and Mika as Yuki just said, each contract matching up with all of Mika's confessions today.....

But more importantly, the final one. The one that really mattered above everything else.

"....."

**' CONTRACT AGREEMENT**

***Date: October X, XXXX***



*From this day, henceforth, Tatsumi Mika shall agree to the terms set by Ayanokouji Atsuomi, to partake in a false marriage for the minimum of a year and to bear the latter's child within that span of time. Once the child is born, and once the sufficient amount of time in marriage has been surpassed and deemed accepted, then Tasumi Mika is free to divorce whilst leaving with the reward of 50 million yen provided by Atsuomi as compensation for her efforts.*

*Signed, Tatsumi Mika*

*Signed, Ayanokouji Atsuomi. '*

When the contract was read out by the judge completely, everyone in the room began to murmur and aim dark glances towards the Naoe company's way. Moreso specifically, the very man who conducted this, Atsuomi.

" T...That....can't be..." The defending lawyer was seemingly speechless. He could of course try to refute the evidence as forgery, but.....this is going too far. If this becomes true, then this paves the way for other preceding evidence to be true as well.

*Mika....* Atsuomi glares at her like he wanted nothing more than to cease her existence while his superior next to him, Naoe, is trying to snap him out of his stupor. Asking him, ' What can we do now? ' with such a fear expression. And Atsuomi knew better than to lie, he knew better to just suck it up already, as he clenched his fists till his nails dug into his skin or bit his lip till it sprouted that disgusting red, he knew....

".....This is an urgent manner, so I apologize to inform everyone, but this court session must be abruptly put to an end." The judge spoke after a few moments with a solemn tone. " With the evidence presented today by both parties.....I am in the belief that processing everything will require a considerate amount of time. To determine the truth once and for all. The Jury is in agreement as well." His gaze shifts to the people on the jury, to which everyone nodded their heads slowly. Still shocked by the final contract. They knew what this could entail.

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" If the remaining evidence is proven to be true, then at best, tomorrow will be the last and final session. I will see both parties until then. Court adjourned."

And the screen cuts to commercials.

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Ruby lets go of a breath she didn't know she was holding, as her head turned to Beryl with a worried expression. His blank look facing the screen, unchanging, even after the program just ended.

" Poor child..." Miyako murmured with a frown towards the screen and releasing a sigh.

" ...Kiyoo--"

Almost immediately, Ruby caught herself and slapped her hands to her mouth. She almost uttered his name in front of Miyako. It would've caused confusion, and a conversation that might potentially be brought about. *Damn it, how could she let that nearly slip!*

Luckily....nobody seemed to notice, The blonde girl noted in relief.

Well, Aqua obviously did. His eyes were focused solely on Beryl's expression as well, he wondered just how his little brother felt-- *just how Kiyotaka is feeling at the moment.* To realize that his real mother from his past life allowed him to be thrown into that hell, without a single fight, she let him be sold to his own father. In a way, Aqua could even deeply sympathize, as he didn't... have the greatest parents either, or more like, there was a lack thereof. He had relatives that raised him but....he didn't find much to feel until Ai in his new life came along as his mother.

Both siblings think their little brother was in a hidden emotional turmoil at the revelation.

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But they couldn't have been more wrong with the assumption.

Admittedly, Beryl was shocked and suprised at this moment, that's for certain. However, it was not of the reasons neither Aqua nor Ruby were thinking, rather, he was simply wondering if the White Room really was just going to shut down after this. He didn't think Yuki would pull this out of her sleeve, something so incriminating that would certainly end it all for that man. The mother? He couldn't have cared less. As far as Beryl was concerned he didn't know that woman until now. Maybe the past Kiyotaka would've showed a more interesting curiosity in the mother that abandoned him....

But not Beryl. As far as he was concerned, his mother has and always will be Ai.

It won't end like this. Beryl thinks, as he can't give chance to be complacent. That man is going to pull something from his sleeve to try and counter, proving Yuki's war isn't over yet.

"Ah, almost forgot," Miyako turns to Aqua. " Did you warm the food?"

Aqua responds with a nod. " Yeah. The table is ready too."

Miyako does a small smile as she gets up, deciding that the mood in the room needs to be changed. She wasn't too fond of everyone's silence, especially when it comes to the context of..... maybe it's better not to think about it too much. Yes.

" Ruby, Beryl. Let's eat what I brought, okay? It's not going to taste good tomorrow, I can tell you that." She suggests.

Beryl silently gets up, nodding, but his mind still clearly elsewhere. Whilst Ruby responds in typical Ruby fashion with bright starry eyes and salivation....but her thoughts remain crossed

on Beryl. Wondering just what he might be feeling.

But of course....food takes the priority for the Hoshino siblings!

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After an hour of going about each other's day while eating on the tasty meals Miyako brought home, it was time to clean up. The task was decided to be left to Beryl and Ruby's care, however, Miyako thought it strange that Ruby volunteered herself so enthusiastically instead of pointing the fingers to Aqua or Beryl (then again she did also require Beryl's help in the end)..... *hm, maybe she's finally maturing*, she thinks as a smile formed on her face from the thought before retiring to her room. Aqua gave Ruby a look, implying that he can guess what she's trying to do, and Ruby responds with a look of her own confirming his suspicions. Satisfied with the wordless answer to his thoughts, he leaves it to them and retires to his bedroom as well, having a lot of thoughts to reorganize himself too.

But when Aqua left the two youngsters alone, Ruby slowly realized how hard it is to actually bring up the matter to Beryl. She planned to use this time to talk to him without him having the option to run away this time.....but the words are getting caught up in her throat. Many opportunities have already presented themselves to her whilst they were cleaning up and yet--!

She completely underestimated how absolutely awkward it is to go about and ask him something like ' *So, Beryl, how do you feel after*

hearing your previous mom just sold you to your dad??? ' --- BY THE GODS HOW CAN SHE ASK SOMETHING LIKE THAT WITHOUT SOUNDING LIKE A TOTAL DINGUS?!

Time was running out, as dishes were already sliding in the racks for it to dry. This was her shot, she just has to--!

" Looks like we're just about done here." Rattling Ruby in her thoughts, Beryl spoke. " I'll entrust the few remaining dishes left to you." He said, drying his hands already.

" Eh?" Ruby turns to him in surprise, only to see him turn his back to her and walking off to the direction of the stairs.

" I'll see you in the morning, Ruby."

" Huh? No! Wait, I--!" Without intending to, the words flew out of her mouth louder than it was supposed to.

But nonetheless, when she saw him stop to look back at her with a questioning expression, she decided that it still left the same effect. And that now is the time to finally ask.

" I have....something to ask you." she slowly starts.

" What is it?" Already from the sound of her tone, Beryl already had an idea, but chose to let her speak first.

".....The woman from the TV..."

" What of her?"

" She's your mother..." God, she thought she sounded stupid just echoing what he already knows. He's heard it! But that isn't what she's trying to say, actually, she's not trying to be literal-- words are hard to articulate for Ruby.

Luckily, Beryl seems to understand what she's really trying to say.

" She is Ayanokoji Kiyotaka's mother. Not mine." He answered, causing the girl to tilt her head in confusion. *When you put it like that, it sounds like you're trying desperately to disconnect those two personas...*

" My mother has and always will be Ai." Beryl says.

" But....still....don't you feel disturbed about all of this? Don't you feel anything about this at all?" *This*, could imply *everything*, from the way Ruby said it. From his still relatively blank past in the White Room to the revelation that he'd been sold to his own father as a mere trust fund for his investors. Everything.

" There is nothing to feel about any of this."

Shocked by his bland countenance this time of all times, Ruby's lips parted in shock. She gets his personality, she knows him, but *acting* like himself at a situation like this is just too much. Should be too much.

" I never knew that woman, so why should I care?" He asked her.

The realization of his words turned her meek. She lowers her head down in embarrassment. " A-Ah....you're right about that. I guess....it wouldn't be strange for you to feel nothing for something like that, huh..."

Especially when you consider the more pressing things that the boy had been through. Though neither have voiced that out.

" Is that all?" Just like that, the conversation went cold. Ruby had nothing else to say despite initially thinking she had a thousand things she wanted answers to, but after voicing out just a few words to her little brother, he effortlessly shuts her down.

" Yes it is....I'm sorry, if I bothered you." Ruby instead apologizes sincerely, bowing her head down in shame. She shouldn't have tried it at all. It was such a difficult topic to walk on, and still she tried to seek his reaction.

Unbeknownst to her, Beryl had furrowed his brows after seeing her downtrodden expression. He wanted to say something, maybe he admit that he appreciated her vain efforts in trying to understand him-- but his brain tells him not to. It's better this way. Until the storm will finally subside, he has to keep her distanced from his troubles. No matter how hard she'll try to bridge their current gap, he'll shatter it again and again. Even if it hurts her.

Even when he doesn't want to.

But....he does have something he'd like to ask her. Just to be certain, before he goes.

" Ruby, did anyone knock on the door while you were alone?" He asked.

She looks up at him, she felt something strange from his question. It feels related to his reaction earlier when he..... no, she shouldn't think too much of it now. She's bothered him enough, just answer.

" No. I haven't heard any knocking as far as I remember...." She said.

"....I see." He nods.

That's good.

Beryl will have to be more vigilant this time. What happened today still bothers him so, and tonight's session of the trial is not easing his nerves one bit. And that....dreadful memory.

It's been a while since he recalled that himself. Everything in him just....moved on its own.

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No matter. He'll have to put that aside for now. Starting tomorrow, he'll have to keep a watchful eye on himself and those he cares about. The White Room will not end here.

The White Room could never end.

That was the belief instilled into him by that man.

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Beryl spent the next day keeping an eye on everything. His surroundings, those he passes by, and those he talks to. He acts normal, as he should. So far there were no instances of him sensing a dreadful presence keeping an eye on him or his companions, which was only natural since the White Room is busy trying to fend off Yuki's efforts. But soon they'll probably come back. And he oughta be prepared when they do.

Like he thought earlier....

*The White Room could never end.*



*" The Jury has found the entire party of Naoe, along with his main accomplice Ayanokouji Atsuomi, guilty. "*

.....

*" The facts have been confirmed, about the White Room's true purpose; The unethical acts of isolating groups of children, to then training them under harsh conditions. This violates several human rights, and so does it call the violation of child endangerment. Among other things, the court has also determined that they are hereby guilty of acts going beyond the White Room itself, political corruption has been confirmed within their branches and will be dealt with accordingly."*

.....

*" Everything is still going under processing. I am aware that this particular case has made everyone anxious, but rest easy now. As the judge heading this session, and all the preceding ones, I can safely say without a doubt; That this is the end of the White Room."*

Court adjourned, get home safe, everyone. Though I can't say the same for these wicked and evil men, along with their group. Everyone involved in this heinous crime will receive a lifetime sentence, without parole nor appeal. "

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When the channel ended, a smile appeared on both Miyako and Ruby's faces. The look of utter relief shared between the two of them. Miyako was relieved that no more children would be put through that facility again, while Ruby is excited at the prospect of seeing Beryl's reaction to this. She has an idea that the news about the White Room, a huge reminder of his past life, to an extent she doesn't truly know about-- ending just like this. She imagines a small smile of relief from his face, but first she turns to Aqua to get his reaction too.

But Aqua's eyes weren't focused on the screen at all. *Just like last time...*

Her gaze followed his, expecting and hoping for a relieved expression on Beryl's face. But all she was met with was look of sheer disbelief. She cocked a brow, maybe it was just the shock that everything is finally over?

" Hey, Beryl." She calls him, and pokes his arm to grab his attention.

But the boy didn't respond, his eyes remained glued to the screen. His expression, still. As his thoughts repeated,

*' The White Room.....ended...?'*

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Mika watched as the guards arrived to take away Naoe and his accomplices, to escort them to their deserved sentences. Each of their faces, distraught, and in disbelief, that they had lost. Some of which weren't even aware of the White Room in the first place but still doomed to suffer by affiliation with its head. Some may call that unfair, but Mika had not the energy to argue with the court's decisions, it was better than nothing at all. What they do now is entirely up to them from this point on.

As for the sentencing.....everyone was condemned to a life sentence. Most would probably think that to be a controversial decision, which is why it wasn't disclosed on TV as to what the fate of these men would be, all that's left is the promise that they would certainly pay. That is, by rotting away under the Japanese system. Well, Mika figures Yuki must've played a hand in this decision somehow as well, because the death penalty should've been the most likely end for these men....but it wasn't. She must've organized that with the jury and judge.

Yuki looked calm as she watched these men get escorted too. Her expression was still, but Mika could spot the secret-- almost sadistic --joy in seeing her plan come to fruition at last. It is to be expected after spending an entire decade of laying down the foundations necessary to take down an entire facility built with a single man's pure ambition.....

Speaking of which....

" Why did you come here, Mika."

Neither would've fathomed that they'd cross paths again. His cold voice interrogates her very being as he was being handcuffed by the guards. Yuki signals for the men to give these two.... ' exes ' a moment, and so they stood on stand-by as the conversation between former husband and wife took place.

" Working against me...." He scoffs. " I'd assumed you were smarter than that."

Before she could get a word in, he speaks again. " Did you think by doing this you could redeem yourself? Is that it? Couldn't handle the crime anymore? " A frown. " i didn't think you'd let guilt of all things finally get to you."

".....I'm not doing this for any of that." Mika answers, clenching her fists before letting it all go with a sigh and a shake of her head. " I ran out of money, that's all." Finally, her expression changes to a smile. it did its job in frustrating Atsuomi even more. " She came to me with a handsome amount, even more than what you gave me in the past. I would be stupid not to agree to these terms, no?" She whispered only to him. " *I love money, you see.*"

" You already know what type of person I am, don't you, Atsuomi?" These words cause Atsuomi to release a huff, and for a moment, he would've believed her. After all that was all he ever truly got to know about the Mika he used to work with.....the Mika before she gave life to his offspring, that is.

" You're not fooling anyone. Something changed with you." he narrows his eyes at her. " And you're going to regret it."

" How so, if I may ask?" Another voice steps into their conversation. The both of them turned their heads to meet amethyst eyes belonging none other to the victor of this entire trial. And a failed subject of the White Room's experiment.

A huff. " You...." Atsuomi's figure shifts to face the young woman's direction, disdain evident on his face. " To think a failure of the White Room would be the one to shut it down, is admittedly, something I haven't once considered. Especially as someone as lackluster as you were. It's a miracle I even managed to remember you-- but I couldn't help but to."

" It is clear to me that both of you have your reasons as to why we stand before here today. But I think *your* reason is clearest; This is simply....petty revenge, isn't it? Because I killed your little ' crush'? " His words were said with clear intent to try and aggravate Yuki, but she was controlled enough to see that this was all but a last ditch attempt to stoop her down to his level.

".....It is." But she admits. " What you did to your own son is unforgivable. And i want nothing more than for you to rot in that empty room as he has." She said, her anger flickering in her tone. " It's your turn to live out this little dream of yours, Atsuomi. Enjoy that White Hell yourself."

A pause.

And the man dared to chuckle.

" Don't be so conceited." Was what he said before the guards decided to tug him and forcefully move him. But still, his head was craned towards them as he spat his final words. " Yuki, even you know this, don't you? *The White Room could never end.* "

Indeed, Yuki has heard those words before. But she decided to dismiss it as nothing more than a worn-down, defeated, sulking old

man's word of one last attempt of trying to get into her head. It doesn't work.

The two watched as the remaining members of Naoe's party leave the room to their decided fates...

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The cold wind of the night envelops them as they stand outside at the park, gazing at the dark and somewhat lit center lake.

" You actually won, Yuki." The older woman spoke in a softer tone than Yuki anticipated. " To think that it was possible.....to think that you'd achieve it is....quite the feat."

" Without your assistance, it's fair for me to say that it would've taken longer than expected." Yuki turns to her. " So I'll have to thank you for your cooperation as well."

Mika smiles. " Aw, that's the nicest thing you said to me yet, dear." The term of endearment receives a scoff from the younger woman, clearly feeling uncomfortable from it as she mutters a gruff response that sounded along the lines of ' Don't call me that, you hag. '

" So....I suppose you owe me a favor now, don't you?" Mika suggests.

" A favor? You should be lucky I didn't allow you to be judged with the life sentence as well, or even gone through the death penalty." She crosses her arms. " Lest, I would have killed you myself a long time ago."

Mika chuckles. " Harsh, still? After me coming all the way here with good intentions?"

" Is it more money that you want?" Yuki decisively questioned.

Up until this point, Yuki reserved her suspicions on Mika's strange behaviour recently but set it aside in favor of pushing through with this trial. But now that it was over, she could finally dissect Mika's intentions of coming here in the first place and volunteering her testimony against someone she had several private affairs with in the past. Coming here, despite stating previously that she had no faith in Yuki's plan at all.

" You know enough that that isn't what I want." Mika said.

" Right," Now it made Yuki wonder. " If not money, then what were you here for?"

" Just a small favor, is all I ask." The woman replied, her eyes tearing away from Yuki and staring back into the lake. " After that, I'll be out of your way. You'll never see me again."

Yuki observed the expression on her face. It was one she'd never seen before. She had to blink a couple of times, wondering if she was mistaking it, but no she didn't. She's seen that look, and worn that same look many times. It's all too identifiable.

And the dots connect, without Mika ever having to say another word.

" I think I know now." Yuki murmurs before uncrossing her arms. A deep breath. " Very well, how about we meet again in a few days from now? We can....get to terms with this ' favor ' of yours by then. There are still things for me to process after the trial so I'll need that amount of time to sweep up the mess that he left behind. Will that be okay with you?" She said, reverting to a more somber speech in tone. The voice she only uses when it's in regards to *that*.

She was answered with a nod. Yuki planned to visit him alone like always, but it looks like he'll be receiving another visitor this time around, huh.

The night passes after they parted ways for now, still due to see each other one final time in a few days' pass.

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### **A couple days later.....**

Ruby thought things would finally go back to normal after the trial officially ended. That she would have her brother back, before all this talk about the White Room appeared, before..... she got to learn of his past identity as Ayanokoji Kiyotaka, the revered product of that place.

For the most part, it actually did. Beryl looks a lot calmer these days, and he's becoming more vocal again. Teasing her, teasing Aqua, teasing anyone that comes his way with his sarcasm and cheeky jokes she thought were absolutely horrible-- *ahem*. Yes, things were looking to be as it was before the entire situation, as if it never even happened. And anyone would just leave it like this as if nothing needs to be meddled with anymore.

But as his sister, she could notice that a new bother was occupying his thoughts this time around. And she doesn't get it. Again. He won't talk to her about his feelings or....anything.

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" I don't get it. Everything's over now, right? " Ruby sighs into her palms as she rant to Aqua. " Something is still bothering him, and yet he still won't say a word of it!"

" It's likely not that simple. Even if the White Room is gone, perhaps something about it still lies with him. Like a scar. They fade after a while but.... the wounds still run deep, never to heal." Aqua speaks his consideration. " Maybe he still doesn't know how to truly process such a feeling. Despite being free, some part of him still feels trapped. Chained. To those memories." And more.

".....Can we really do nothing about it, Aqua?" Ruby's face looked downcast. " He looks....happier these days, but that's only for looks. I feel like....it's as you said, he's confused. I don't want to meddle unnecessarily and I know rushing the process isn't a good idea but I'm just scared that he'll still return to the way he was before."

Aqua didn't know how Beryl was really feeling about this either. He doesn't seem to exhibit any sort of trauma that suggests any fear was instilled to him, but it was something else. It's disbelief, but why? Did he really believe that he could never truly be free from his chains like this? Or is it because he knew something they didn't.

" I'm sure you'll figure something out. If he was ever going to listen to anyone, it'd likely be you, Ruby." Aqua suddenly says. " After all, in the past few weeks, you made more progress in getting him to open up than I could in years. There's....something special between you two, from what I can tell."

It was an outspoken point that could be understood and seen by just about anybody. Ever since young, those two were always at each other throats ( Though Ruby was typically the instigator for most of their conflicts ) and it's a wonder how in other times these two get along really well. But what really sells the fact is that when one of the two gets into a bad time, the other is there right by his or her side, ready to listen to their cries. Again, usually from Ruby. But Beryl had put it in his fair of effort too that can't go unnoticed, he'd put a stop to all of Aqua's attempts to make sure Ruby stayed far away from the idol world.....much to Aqua's continued displeasure of the fact to this day.

But it does prove how close of a bond they really have. And Aqua believes his own words to be true; If there was anyone in the world who could break down Beryl's walls, it was Ruby.

".....I know." Ruby smiles, suprising Aqua. " I'll break through that dummy's skull before I'd ever let him get distant again, that's for sure." She confidently states as she put her hands on her hips. " After all, I entrusted him with the position as my future secretary when I get big and famous. And I'll see to it that his promise is kept!"



After that sudden declaration, Ruby turned on her heel and left Aqua alone by the gym. The older triplet was bewildered by her switch of emotions, but he can't help but smile a bit too from what she said.

*Yeah, looks like there was nothing to worry about after all.*

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*What am i supposed to do now?*

Beryl thought the natural move would be to just move on and continue living. That's what anyone would've done in his place. And so he did.....or tried to. Certainly, a burden had been lifted from his shoulders and he had the ticket to just live as he did before the White Room began appearing on the news. But he still couldn't shake off the shock.

To finally be free of it all, was something he could never imagine. Even if the White Room had no direct connection him as Hoshino Beryl, all the memories and concerns of it making contact with him in this life had haunted him for a month or so. And now to see that Yuki managed to shut it down, and imprison all those affiliated with the facility.....it's remarkable.

He should be relieved. Happy. And content.

And yet....something within him is stopping him from relishing it. It annoys him because he can't pinpoint exactly what that is yet. It's been a few days, and it's all he'd been thinking about all the while maintaining normalcy again.

Suddenly, a voice spoke.

" Eating alone?"

He turns his head to see who that was, and none to his surprise it was Shiranui Frill. Again.

He says ' again ' because the girl had started the habit of finding him and eating lunch with him whenever he wasn't with his friends. Which had been happening for a while now. He preferred to be left with his thoughts alone during the break, but she insists otherwise, proving it with how she already sat down next to him without him even having to put in a word.

" Thank you for the meal." She muttered before chowing down her lunch in a graceful manner befitting the multitalented girl revered by the entire school.

" You've been getting far too comfortable accompanying me like this, Shiranui-san." Beryl calls her out as she was eating, and while chewing she turns to him with her lime greens staring directly at him. " If I didn't know any better, I might think that you're infatuated with me or something."

A few moments were spent in silence just staring at each other after that poor conversation starter.

" Hm," Frill's eyes depart from his figure, deciding to gaze elsewhere as she responded, " An interesting assumption. What would you say if it were true?"

"Sorry, but I'd reject you immediately." He blandly answers.

He notices that upon him saying that, a ghost of a smirk plays on

her lips. As if doubting the validity of his words.

" You are....so interesting, Hoshino-kun." Frill comments with a glint in her pupil, " A box full of unexpected surprises."

" As a fan, I would've liked nothing more than to have you on the set. Your skills with the camera would certainly enhance my performance." She similarly states like last time.

*A mixture of both confidence and ego....* Beryl thinks.

" Unfortunately for you--- again -- I don't plan to do more than I have to. This isn't even really a gig, but more of a favor my brother asked of me to do. That's all." Beryl shrugs.

" Yes....it's a shame. But I will honor my promise of respecting your choice, so let's change topic shall we?" She finishes eating and closes the lid of her container. " I see that the dark look on your face has been lightening up for the past few days."

" Do you really not have the necessary conversation skills to actually switch to a more pleasant topic, you weirdo?"

Frill disregards the title at the end and continues, " Still, despite the improvement making you even more so desirable lately from the girls' side--" Beryl notes that was an unnecessary sentence, " -- you still look as if something is hounding you mentally. Like....you can't truly relax, or embrace the present."

"....." Beryl had no flashy remark nor witty comeback to that, silence was all he could offer in that moment. Because she was right on the bullseye with that assumption.

.....

" Though, who am I to be so sure of such a thing, huh?" Frill seemingly retracts upon sensing his silent confirmation. " I'm being super nosy, aren't I? My apologies if I made you uncomfortable."

" Too late. I'm scarred by you already, Miss Stalker." Beryl quips

back at her almost instantaneously, catching her by surprise. " You being nosy has caused me to severely feel my anxiety overflow. For this, I might just have to sue you."

" Oh?" Frill was now amused by how quickly he jumped in to change their atmosphere. " Sue me? Don't start a battle you can't win, Hoshino-kun. But if you insist..... then I'll happily do my best in retaliation."

" Though, if by the chance I win the case; Then you are going to be *bound* to me for an....unsure amount of time." She winks suggestively while keeping her blank face.

To any other man, this display would've looked attractive, sultry, and oh-so-tempting. But to Beryl, he found it utterly goofy, completely evident from the way he immediately pointed it out and made fun of her.

" You look dumb right now, Shiranui Frill." He remarks, a low chuckle escaping his breath.

" Do I now..." Frill responds, secretly observing the rather....nice look on his face this time around.

*Ah, I was right. That look does suit you better.* Frill thinks after seeing a glimpse of him forgetting his worries at last, even if it was for a moment.

It was a suprising turn of events, but Beryl had to admit it. He found her presence worthwhile this time around. Though temporary, this complete stranger provided him some gentle respite. But Beryl knew that wouldn't last long, once break ends, he'll be alone with his thoughts once more.

He'll have to endure this unknown feeling again.

~~~~~

The sounds of an engine stopping and parking at the forest opening scares away all the nearby birds and scatters them. Two women step out of the vehicle, taking in the clean air that could only be found outside of the busy city. Along with the beautiful scenery before them of mother nature.

But unfortunately, these two shan't enjoy the view much longer. They were here for more important business, after all.

" This is as far as the car can go. The place is a kilometer uphill climb." Yuki addresses, formally. " But be careful, some parts may be slippery, so take care in following behind. Got that?" She said, eyeing for Mika's reaction.

The older woman slowly nodded, her heart beating slightly faster than anticipated.

Just up ahead.... Mika tells herself after realizing she made this choice, and yet it was oh so tempting to run away from it. Truthfully, she dreaded today, despite coming all the way to Tokyo to ask for this one favor from Yuki.

But when Yuki marched towards the dirt path leading up along the way, Mika followed without another word. She won't allow herself to get cold feet after coming all the way here.

.....

" Hey, I've been meaning to ask you." Yuki spoke calmly as they hike up the hill.

" *Haah.....m-meaning to ask.....hah...!* W-what?" Mika pants as she replied with very shaky breaths. She begins to regret spending most of her years confined to her own home and living by with a bottle in hand every single day. Her stamina and endurance wasn't doing so well, and she's astonished for a moment how Yuki seems unfazed by it all, but quickly dismisses the thought as she remembered the girl was a previous White Room student once.

" That bag you brought with you and left at the car. You never told me what was in it."

" *Haah.....you never....asked...*"

" Well, that's because I thought it was something you brought for the trip. But seeing that you left it there suggests it's for something else entirely. So I'd like to know now." Yuki pauses, turning back to see if Mika was still trailing after her.

Yuki smirked in amusement when she saw the sweaty red-faced panting older woman who seemed ready to pass out any moment now. It was incredibly tempting to laugh, but that would equate to showing vulnerability to this woman, which is something she'd rather die than ever show.

When Mika was finally within vicinity again, Yuki was merciful enough to hand her a water bottle. To which Mika hastily drank to the last drop, a flood of relief cools her body down and calms her mind from being distracted by the heat and the numbness of her legs.

Finally, after rehydrating, she answers. " You'll see later..... after we finish our business here."

Yuki clicks her tongue at that before moving along again.

" Well we should move with haste. We should be done here before it starts to get dark."

Mika nods, preparing herself with a few deep breaths, before moving after her as well.

.....

" This is it..."

Yuki's solemn tone tore through the serenity of the view, as they both stood there a good few meters away from the lone grave standing in the opening.

"....." Mika didn't know what to say. To think that....after all these years....some part of her fooled herself into thinking that he was doing okay. And hiding behind her nonchalant attitude to prevent herself from *feeling*.

Her hands shook with each step as she went to the grave. Yuki didn't move an inch from her spot, opting to let Mika have her moment with the son she gave away. As Mika got closer, she noticed just how exactly they treated his grave; rough, hasty, and the engraving poorly written. she couldn't dare call this a burial, as it feels as though it were more of a disposal than a proper send-off.

.

.

.

She stands before it, in a cold unforgiving silence.

"...."

She recalls that conversation from not so long ago.

"..... How was he buried? " She had asked, quietly.

" Buried on an obscure hill, a lone grave, and his name written with haste. That's all."

It was indeed as Yuki said.

.....How fitting. For a child that couldn't live up his father's standards.

But to Mika....

" He was my son, yes. And I am his biological mother, there's no denying that. But all that aside, he was just work to me."

.....Right, that's what she said. That's....what she truly feels, no?

She was a mother who didn't love him. Hell, she never considered herself a mother in any sense. The whole world goes against her in that aspect, and she's fine with that.

".....Still...."

That small voice in her heart whispers...

" I would've.....loved to have you in better circumstances...."

To have you, if I had been a better person. Her heart ached.

Everything inside hurt. It hurt so much. So much to the point she believed not even the numbing effects of alcohol could nullify.

Still, she wouldn't dare cry in front of him.

She is a mother.....who never loved her child, after all.

.....

Yuki looked to the sky. It's been a while since she visited this place, she could hardly remember the last time, really. She had to put aside almost all thoughts of him to prevent from getting a rise

out of her emotions, yet ironically enough, she'd work her entire existence all for him. To avenge him. And now she's succeeded.

She can recall the first few times she visited here, the wounds still fresh after the first time when her father brought her here. Her mind would be flooded with memories, past dreams, desires, and regrets. So she felt hesitant to visit here until after the deed was done.....but even then, coming here after it was all over, it didn't make things feel any easier within her heart.

She stands beside Mika who seemed to look the other way. But Yuki had eyes focused on him. Like it'd always been.

Like the day they met.

" Long time no see, Kiyotaka." Yuki's voice was gentle, with a hint of mourning. She knelt on the ground, not caring if the stray rocks were piercing through her pants and roughing up her legs. Trivial things like that could never hurt her more than speaking to the boy she lost. " I planned to visit you once things were over.....and hey, guess what? I did it."

" The White Room....is over. It's not going to hurt anyone anymore. I know that you might not care, but at the very least, you can rest assured that your pain wasn't for nothing." She sighs. " I wish you were here to see that, though." A sad smile. " If you were still alive, both you and I would be free to do as we pleased."

Travelling to other continents, going to so many different countries, trying the food, and learning the culture. To enjoy the outside world that'd been boarded away from them when they were children by all monsters in that White Space. A life they could've explored together.

".....Anyway," Yuki shakes her head apologetically. " as I said, I planned to come here alone.....but I guess you can see that I'm not in fact *alone*." Her eyes flicker to the woman beside her, who finally returned her gaze. " This woman.....she's actually your--"

" I'll be heading down now." Mika interrupts.

" Hm?" Yuki raises a brow, now that was sudden.

" I came here because I wanted to see this grave. It was as you said. A very poor burial. I regret coming here, as it feels like a waste of my time now." Mika muttered, arrogantly, before turning around and walking away as Yuki frowned. " I'm a patient woman, so go ahead and rant to your lover with as much time as you want. I'll be waiting by the car." She hummed before setting off.

Yuki sighs, shaking her head. She had her fists clenched, tempted to beat Mika up for speaking like that without consideration, but she wasn't suprised. She already knew how horrible of a human Mika really is, despite being one of the sole reasons they won the case..... it didn't mean Yuki had to like her.

It was a good thing Yuki had the keys, else Mika would've possibly driven off and left her here--

Hm?

Her thoughts halt as her eyes spot something particular on the ground where Mika once stood. Droplets of water had mixed in with the dirt.

Tears....

".....Seems like you were capable of feeling love, after all, Mika." Yuki whispers before chuckling and then facing Kiyotaka's grave again. " Did you see that? Seems like your mother is a crybaby, isn't she?"

She didn't have much of a right to say that out loud,

Especially when Yuki was on the verge of tears too.

~~~~~

When Yuki returned to the car where Mika waited. She chose not to comment on the tears that the older woman left behind. If she did, then she would've probably tried to deny it with some stupid excuse.

Besides, there was a more important thing to pay attention to at the moment.

" Take it."

Were Mika's words, as she offered the bag she had brought without stating its purpose.

"...." Yuki was feeling suspicious about the suddenness, but maybe it was because of the previous atmosphere that she loosened herself up just a bit, to take it and check it out herself.

" Huh?" Yuki's eyes widened in surprise. " Money...? Wait, isn't this the money I--"

" I decided to give it back to you. Not a single yen was spent, I assure you." Mika said.

"....Why?" Yuki had to only ask. This was strange of Mika to do.

" .....I have no need of it." Mika answered, promptly. " What use is there when I plan to turn myself in, no?"

" Huh?" Again, Yuki showed visible surprise. Another curveball had been thrown at her without warning-- *just how many does this woman have in ammunition?*

" Is it that surprising?" Mika smiled, amused.

" Why?" Again, the same question, but to a different context.

" Maybe it's old age catching up to me, or maybe....it's the regrets for the choice I'd made." Mika answered. " There's no use to me in living like I always did. Spending days rotting away in my own mansion should be no different than a lifetime behind bars. "

Yuki, for once, could sense the sincerity in Mika's tone. No hidden meanings. No sly remarks, No deception. She was speaking from her desire, without selfish motives.

" And I know there's no redeeming someone like me. I am just as much of a monster as Atsuomi." Mika sighs. " It's unfair to let myself walk free and act like I did nothing wrong. So that's that."

" Oh, and one more thing." Mika looks deep into Yuki's eyes. " You may keep the money and spend it as you wish. It was never mine, it was always yours. But.....if I could you ask one last favor....."

A small pause.

" Please use a portion of the money to give that brat a proper burial." Mika smiles again, but the pain was no longer hiding. " I have no intention of letting my own flesh and blood be buried at such a tacky destination, as well as having a poorly made grave. It won't do well under my name."

"....."

" Well, that's all." Mika hums as she reaches for the car door. " Let's get out of here. The last task you have is to just escort me into the hands of the authority and as promised you will never see me again--"

" No."

Mika pauses.

" Hm?" Mika turns back to look at her, " No?" she repeated, confused.

After a considerable amount of silence and contemplation, Yuki lays her verdict.

" I'm not letting you get out of this easy." Yuki says as she narrows her eyes. " Do you really think I'd let you simply rot away in a place no different from your mansion? That would be too easy of a punishment on you."

" So what then?" Mika chuckles darkly. " Well, if you're implying what I think you're implying. Then I suppose being put to death is suitable--"

" That's not what I mean either." Yuki interrupts her.

Yuki stares right into Mika's brown hollow orbs.

" You've changed, Mika." She states, almost sounding in disbelief, even.

"....."

" .....I didn't believe you had the capacity to. But you did." Yuki directs her attention to the bag. " You say that you know you aren't going to be redeemed so easily-- if at all. But I know redemption is also what you want.....am I right?"

".....You White Room brats are really something else." Mika sighs, exasperation clear in her voice. But after a few moments, she nods. Affirming Yuki's suspicions.

" Redemption is a hard thing to come by. Not all sins can be forgiven in this world, that includes yours, especially." Yuki bluntly says, " Nobody will ever forgive you, Mika."

".....I know."

Mika didn't expect Yuki's words to be so piercing. But she wasn't anything other than right at the moment. It's not like Mika was expecting a happy ending for herself either, which was why she wanted to make one last choice in at least making things right, before she would decide to rot away like the world wanted her to. She assumed that, but it doesn't seem like Yuki agreed with the idea, judging by the complicated look she wore.

".....I want you....to suffer." She said before continuing. " And in order to suffer properly, you must live."

" Live with your mistakes. Live with your regrets eating away at you. Every single waking moment you'll remember each and every horrible thing you've done and let it overwhelm you." Mika thought

that was that, because Yuki was describing a hell she never thought she'd fear. She hung her head low, accepting her wishes. But....

" And while going through that, I want you to live chasing after redemption."

Those words were out of place. Mika thought that as she raises her head again to meet the younger woman's eyes.

" Chase after redemption, even though you'll never truly be redeemed. Do everything you can to apologize, though nobody will lend you an ear." Yuki looks off to the path they previously walked. " Do everything you can to live.....to make up for everything, in his name. Though he'll never be here to see that."

" That is the appropriate punishment, no?" Yuki turns back to her. The silent Mika stared back. She was stunned, everything Yuki said sounded horrible and sadistic but.....

*It also sounded like the hardest life she'll have to live from now on.*

" I appreciate your gesture with handing me back the money." Yuki adds. " I'll be sure to provide Kiyotaka and everyone else, their well-deserved ceremonies. As well as using the extra bit for the rest of children we retrieved from the facility."

"....I see." Mika nods. " Thank you, Sagami."

Yuki doesn't acknowledge her gratitude but instead goes into the car, placing the bag at the back. Mika takes another moment to regain her composure a bit before entering too.

.....

" Do you plan to return the kids to their families?" Mika asked, though the answer was obvious. That was the point of small talk.

" That's the plan. Though, I'm won't be in charge of the process." Yuki answered, " There are still things I have to help rectify before I can make any moves with their recovery phases."

" Well, if it's you. Then I believe you can handle it without pressure." Mika hums. " You managed to win the war, after all."

In response to that, Yuki furrowed her brows. To which Mika picked up on, but before she could say anything, Yuki spoke.

" Yeah....I won." Her tone was calm, though the grip on the steering wheel seemingly looked as though it would be crushed.

*Something seems off with her*, Mika thought. But she didn't voice it out. She could be wrong.

However, if she were to be blatantly honest.

*It almost looks as if...*

*Even after she's won the war,*

*Yuki doesn't seem content at all.*

[ Chapter End ]

After 2 or 3 months, this chapter has finally arrived.....unfortunately, it is a shame for me to tell you this; But this chapter is actually incomplete.

I didn't want to publish this, trust me. I wanted to reach my goal of bringing you a very delicious chapter after a VERY long wait, but I just cant do it. I'm sorry.....

I do think that this chapter IS still delicious, but due to it having to be cut half way, as the writer of this fanfiction I am very unsatisfied. Stopping at 17k word count, this marks only 50% of the original chapter.

yes. ONLY 50%. This was supposed to be A LOT longer. Maybe even surpassing 30k word count if I was feeling very

wordy. Unfortunately, i could do neither as I have already decided to publish this.

The reason I did so is because i have a lot of things to do at the moment. So I don't have much time to myself to write. And I know christmas break is coming ( god i need it ) but i cant promise I'll be able to write ANYTHING during christmas break, as I have a lot of work to do anyway. And I'd rather spend my free time on anywhere else besides wattpad. So it's really a shame.

The ending of this chapter was supposed to be the first among MANY of the high points of this original arc, as I had planned what I think is a really good scene that will truly set the tone of the fic from this point on. But you guys will just have to look forward to that next chapter, im super sorry.

I know I tell you guys to bear with me a lot, and I wanna state here that I APPRECIATE all of ur support and patience. But pls do expect me to ask this of you every single chapter from now on, cuz yeah....i'll need u to bear with me <3

I'll do my best to finish this fic, and fight off against my demotivation in writing. Your support really helps me, so thank you again.

But um...yeah! I hope you enjoyed this chapter tho! I know it may seem Yuki centric this time around ( I did warn u abt this in 7.5 ) and I hope you enjoyed my way of characterizing her. I dont know when I can promise next chapter will come around, but it will be more Beryl/Kiyo centric again, and a LOT more suprising ( hopefully...)

Look forward to it! I'll be sure to continue writing whenever I have the freedom and the mindset to get into it.

Random Question of the chapter: What do you think are the reasons for Beryl's ' unknown feeling ', and Yuki's supposed ' discontent ' even after winning? ( You dont have to answer, but for those who have thoughts they wanna share, feel free! It's nice to hear your thoughts )



**Stay safe, wherever your guys are at! And see you in the next chapter :D**

## 12. The Meaning of Freedom

" IS FREEDOM ANYTHING BUT THE RIGHT TO LIVE AS WE WISH?  
NOTHING ELSE. "

- *Epictetus*

~~~~~

---So you really did it. You ended the White Room.---

" Yeah." Yuki pauses for a moment, before continuing. " From the tone of your voice, it almost sounds like you had doubted me for a moment there, Shiro..."

--- Er....well, can you blame me? I thought you'd let your emotions get ahead of you and prolong their ' torturous ' period just a little more. Jut enough time for them to launch a strike against you.---

Yuki sighs, giving away her answer to that. There really was no blaming her former genmate in the scenario that she could've let that happen.

--- But I'm glad. You kept to your word, and you listened to my advice of ending it early. That man and his accomplices are in jail, and everyone that had been trapped in that place is free. Quite the happy ending, I'd say ---

Or so he says....but....

" That isn't what you're really thinking, is it, Shiro." Yuki knew better. The call went silent for a bit, she could imagine Shiro wearing an amused expression at the other side of the world right now.

--- Well....you're right. I've got a ton of things to say but firstly, I'm quite shocked that you brought in Kiyotaka's mother *in the flesh* on live television. It's fortunate I was able to see it this time around since I'm staying in the main city for the week, and it just so happened that the trial was still ongoing. But anyway, how did you get her on board in the first place? I didn't take her as someone who would risk something like that without an interesting exchange... ---

Yuki shared the same thoughts. The broadcast of the trial was a global controversy, with billions wanting to see how Japan would handle this alarming case of several human right violations, supported with a huge amount of substantial evidence from Yuki. The main prosecutor of this entire situation. And it doesn't take even half a brain to figure out that someone like Mika wouldn't have agreed to show her face in front of that many people, simply to confirm not just the validity of the case itself, but her own guilty association.

Mika wasn't the type of person to do that.....and yet...

" If I told you, you'd be just as suprised as I was." Yuki replied.

--- **Suprise me.** ---

" She only asked to see his grave. "

--- **Huh..... well damn, I really am suprised.** ---

Yuki could tell that Shiro has more or less taken an accurate guess after just hearing that.

--- **So....what did you do with that woman? Knowing you, I doubt you'd let her go just like that.** ---

Yuki leans back on her chair.

" She's lucky to be alive still. Or rather, unlucky, I'd say. From now on she's going to live trying to repent for something she'll never be forgiven."

--- I see.....and how did she take that? ---

"....She accepts it. In fact, she even gave me back the money I paid her the first time. All she asked was to use a small portion of it to provide a proper burial ceremony for Kiyotaka, though she insists it wasn't because she loved him or cared for him as a son. She says it's because it'd hurt her pride to see someone of her own ' flesh and blood ' be buried in such an ugly fashion."

--- I see.....heh, I wonder how Kiyotaka would've reacted to something like that. ---

That receives a small grin from Yuki. She could imagine it. It's very likely to believe that he wouldn't have had a single reaction to seeing his real mother, but it's fun to entertain the thought that he might've actually showed genuine emotion. And if Mika had realized her wrongs sooner..... maybe she would've taken him under her care, and perform her duty as a mother.

Perhaps Yuki could've gotten out of the White Room too, with her father's help. Then she would've met up with Kiyotaka in later years.....they'd catch up with each other.....he'd be happier, and she'd be ecstatic just to see him finally smile.

However, there was no use in bringing up past fantasies of when she was younger. When he's no longer here. So her grin closed to a thin line, reverting back to its neutral countenance.

" Can we move on? There's another thing you'd like to tell me, right? Stop stalling." She said it a bit too hastily, she silently cursed herself for sounding so obvious, Shiro can clearly call her out on it now.

--- You're right, I should just get this out of the way then, huh...---

He hummed from the other line.

--- *Now that everything's over..... what are you going to do now?*

"...."

--- Yuki. What's your plan now that everything's over? ---

He repeated once more, it could be the fact that Shiro has an idea of how she's feeling currently. What type of face she's wearing currently. The look of uncertainty.

A few uncomfortable minutes passed, and there was yet to be an answer to that question.

" I.."

She opened her mouth, to respond, but with what? What is she supposed to say? It was as if her thoughts came to a complete halt. And the feeling of discontent expanding within her didn't help either.

---Heh. I warned you about this didn't I? ---

.....

--- In the end, you still feel like you're ' *there* ', don't you? ---

.....

--- You don't know what to do from here. You're lost without your drive. ---

" No, I'm--"

--- Tell me, Yuki; Who are you now that the White Room is gone? ---

Her amethyst eyes widened in surprise from his question, immediately, she began pondering on it for the answer. But nothing came up. It made her feel....uncomfortable with the fact. It shouldn't be disturbing her this much, but she can't help it. Especially when she knew she had this question coming for her as soon as everything was over.

.....

She....had no answer.

She couldn't find an answer.

" I....have to go." So instead, she tries to dismiss it. " I'm busy you see."

--- Are you now? ---

She could imagine his eye brow raised in question as he asked that. If he were standing in front of her, he would surely be staring down into her soul for her answer.

" Yes....I've still got plenty of things to do." It wasn't a lie, yet some part of her felt like it was.

He hums from the other line, again. It felt like a mantra that spelled her doom one way or another somehow.

--- I see. I won't hold you up then. ---

Yuki silently releases a sigh of relief.

" I'll talk to you sometime soon, Shiro."

.....

The call ends.

~~~~~

It's now been almost 2 weeks since the White Room ended. A part of Beryl still couldn't really process that.

" Good work everyone!" Tamako praised as the team finished for the day.

" God...finally....my back is just killing me!" Tako sighed aloud.

" Uhh, is this a bad time for me to ask you for notes then, Tako...?" Hayate said, chuckling nervously when Tako glared at him with red tired eyes.

" Get a low GPA. See if I care." Tako said, huffing, before putting on her coat and heading towards the door.

" Aw, cmon! I'll treat you to sukiyaki!" Hayate yelled before grabbing his jacket too, and leaving the cafe to chase after her.

".....So they're just gonna leave us to clean this all up?" Beryl mutters.

Tamako laughs before shaking her head. " Let them be. There's not much to clean up anyway, and I'm in a good mood after we managed through a busy Saturday." She continues to sweep as she talked, " Wipe the tables, while I'll deal with the floors."

" Alright, boss." Beryl sighs before getting the cleaning rags and proceeding to work.

Time passed by quickly, with Tamako's humming and short songs filling in the silence, and drowning out the annoying thoughts circulating in Beryl's head. It wasn't before long that they both realize that they'd successfully cleaned up everything. Beryl returned the cleaning supplies back into the closet, he was readying to leave since there didn't seem to be a point in delaying his return home, but just as he was going to open the door a soft tap on his shoulder halted his movement.

Curious, he turns back to see Tamako with a soft smile on her face. *And she had a bottle in hand....*

" Hey, mind staying with your boss for a bit? I've got something I wanna talk about with you."

" Sure.....but...." Beryl eyed the bottle of sake she was holding, and then looking to her eyes with a blank expression. " I don't drink."

.....

" Ah! Cheers to us!" Tamako said before bumping her cup with his and then immediately downing the cup of sake effortlessly. While Beryl didn't look too ecstatic with the cup he held in his hand as she was.

" Come on, you gotta try it! Won't hurt to at least take a sip, right? " She encourages him.

" An adult like yourself encouraging an underaged high school student to drink..... that doesn't paint a good picture for you, no?" Beryl remarks slyly.

The appropriate drinking age for anyone in Japan was 20. Tamako should know that. If anyone finds out that she encouraged Beryl to drink alcohol, her business might face some serious repercussions, and he could imagine that the regular patrons of the cafe might be repulsed if that fact were to become true and never come again.

" You're like....18 now, right?"

" 16."

" So what? That's just minus four from twenty! " Tamako shrugs before pointing to the cup with a huge grin. " Drink." She insists again.

" .....If Miyako-san hears about this, she's going to kill you." Beryl sighs as his golden brown eyes stare into the clear bubbly reflection from his cup of sake.

" Shhh, nobody's going to know." Tamako winks. *Oh, Miyako*



*would surely find out, and kill this woman for it...*

" I doubt that."

*I don't really want to drink, but at the same time, I'm a bit curious of its taste....* Beryl thought, carefully considering the pros and cons of his decision. As far back as he can recall, his mother's old manager Ichigo would drink this stuff like it was blessing from the gods, usually in celebration of Ai's newly achieved milestones over the years. Miyako would also partake in these celebratory sessions of his ( though she seems to have stopped drinking nowadays ), and Beryl can't forget that he tried convincing Ai to drink too a year before she would become 20.

Adults seem to love this stuff.

*I guess it won't hurt to find out the reason why....*

.....

A burst of sweetness with a tinge of acidity his Beryl's taste buds as he downed the cup straight. He released a hum of surprise as he didn't expect it to be quite sweet for something that's just " rice wine ", he wonders about the process that goes into making sake. Did they add chemicals to make it taste this sweet? It's quite hard to believe this is just naturally processed. It tasted like....fruit. More specifically, the flavor of apple.

" See, wasn't so bad, was it?" Tamako chimes.

It seems like his curiosity was met with a pleasant surprise. Sake didn't taste bad at all, and Beryl can understand why adults seem to love this stuff now. But.....he'd rather not develop any drinking habits himself.

" It wasn't what I expected. it tastes pretty good." He admits.

Her smile widens,

" See? How about I pour you another--"

" Still, I don't plan to drink more. So I'll pass on that." He

interrupted her, pushing back his now-empty cup towards her as she pouted in disappointment.

" Geez, what a boring teen!" She sighed dramatically.

" Tamako-san, you're far too old to be acting like a young adolescent yourself, so I suggest you quit it. It's kinda embarrassing to watch." Beryl bluntly replies.

Ack! Tamako nearly dropped her cup as the words pierce her soul.

Although Beryl always found teasing as an entertaining hobby, something nagged at him in regards to their interaction.

" What did you want to talk about?" Without wasting any more time, he wishes to get to the root of the matter.

Tamako smirks before pouring herself another cup. " To celebrate, of course." she drinks. " Now that the white room is gone, nobody is going to tail neither you or I ever again." She pours another.

This time, it was to his empty cup.

" We've been feeling....uneased, ever since this whole ordeal popped up." Tamako softly laughs, pushing the cup back to Beryl's vicinity. " So why don't we unwind this way? With a good ol' session of drinking sake."

*' The White Room is gone....'*

Will he ever get used to that?

" Right.....it's over." He repeats to himself.

" Mhm, it's over. I told you Yuki could do it." Tamako says.

The mention of Yuki briefly made Beryl wonder how she's doing now. Her plan succeeded, she put that man and everyone else

involved behind bars. To endure a lifetime sentence where they'd rot for years, never to step foot outside ever again. Does she feel satisfied? Or does she....also share this same unknown feeling within him. A familiar voice within the depths of his conscious points to the latter.

Beryl dismisses those thoughts for now, reengaging back into present time, he watched as Tamako continues to down cup after cup.

" Tamako-san, I have a question."

" Which is~?" She sounded tipsy already. But it didn't matter.

" After what happened last time.....what do you think of me now?" He asked.

" Last time? Oh, right....when you threatened and interrogated me about the White Room." She says, light-heartedly before humming. " Well, you're suprisingly smart, that's for sure." She toned down, and sent him a thoughtful look.

" Another would be, that you're quite strange." She emphasizes. " Something about you feels off..... now don't get me wrong, this is all just my speculations or a drunken thought but....I feel as though you know more than you actually let on." She says.

Beryl, intrigued by this direction, waits in silence for the rest.

" Almost as if....you too are connected to a horrible facility like that. Like a ghost of a previous dissatisfied spirit....or..." she furrowed her brows.

" Or what?"

She looks up at him.

" Or a reincarnation."

Beryl stares back at her. Doing well in maintaining his composure, so as not to give away the truth so easily. " A reincarnation, you say...." Beryl found it amusing that she was right

on the dot.

" Yes....a reincarnation..." She nods, before her eyes went down to her empty cup. " Though, I'm not a religious person, so I wouldn't entertain that thought more than I need to....." she retracts.

Not religious huh. Well neither was Kiyotaka. But here we are.

" Any more impressions I give off besides those two?" He asked.

".....Heh, yeah..." Tamako's smile turned sad. Her eyes squint at him. " *I guess.... perhaps.....a manifestation of my deepest regrets.*"

She drinks another cup before leaning back and sighing, her half-lidded drunken eyes staring into the cafe ceiling. " As a person who's lived half of her life at this point, I have too many regrets to even think about."

" Regrets related to the White Room, I presume." Beryl replies.

A small nod from Tamako. " Yes, too many." She bitterly laughs. " God, I'm so glad that place shut down. I absolutely hated it."

Tamako continues, " When you threatened me, you gave me a look that reminded me of everything I'd done wrong back when I still worked as those..... *instructors.*" Her grip on her cup got noticeably tighter. " I was only there for one reason. I was lost in life, and someone close to me offered me direction. I don't know what got into me for me to have decided on working there. And as expected, I wasn't ready for what I signed up for."

White walls containing their cries and breakdowns,

White floors stained with scratches, blood, and other substances.

Rooms full of children brought upon and nurtured through a twisted ambition....

Two particular young faces she could never forget.

.....

" At first, my experience wasn't all that bad. I wasn't in charge of disciplining those kids the way the others did, if you could even call it that." It was torture. " I was mainly an instructor on the side of academics. From there, you can assume that my job was indeed to teach them the high standard curriculums across several subjects."

" I did my best to try and calmly guide the kids as best I could without resorting to the others'..... ' methods ' in getting them to understand the material faster. I was never a fan of how the other instructors conducted their classes." She releases a sigh, showing her rising frustrations being brought out to the light. " To this day, I still don't understand why the director allowed this. They were just *kids*. They-- *we* should've treated them as such. "

Beryl, noticing the way her shoulders shook, began to think of a way to calm her down. After a moment, he begins pouring sake into her empty cup. Her breathing halts, as she looked to him with a silent thankful glance, before downing the cup straight again. Releasing a sigh of relief, she feels herself relax again.

Beryl pours her another, as she continues her story.

"Through those first few months, I did things my way. I did my best to treat them as they should've been from the start.....and the children reacted positively to that. Especially this one little girl, she was such a doll. Along with her twin brother. The both of them differed in so many views and personality-wise, but they had a wonderful bond that I just....adored." Tamako smiles at the memory. " The two of them were probably my favorite students back there."

*Twins, huh....*

Suddenly the image of Aqua and Ruby popped back into his mind.

" Hehe, now that I think about it....maybe that's why I like you so much, Beryl. Along with your siblings. The three of you remind me

so much of them." Tamako lets out a sardonic chuckle before drinking another.

"What happened to the twins?" Beryl asked as he poured more for her.

But upon registering the question, Tamako stays quiet. Even when her cup was filled for her to drink, she did nothing but stare into it. A look of regret, scorn, sadness, and longing, all mixed into the process. Beryl could only imagine what had happened to the twins from the way she reacted. Nothing good, that could be surmised.

.....

It took a while, it was silent for so long. It didn't last just mere minutes. It took an hour, a silent hour with just the two of them alone, the older woman simply drinking while Beryl kept pouring. And during that hour he wonders why he even agreed to this in the first place. Just what does he intend to gain here from learning more about Tamako's story? Was he perhaps searching for an answer that could serve him by talking to an individual who's had experience in the White Room and is not out to potentially hurt the people he cares about?

He feels as though it was close to the true reason. But still a bit off.

It wasn't sympathy....and it's not about relation. What he needed an answer to this entire time was--

*"To this day, I guess I still feel that I am trapped."*

Beryl's breath hitches. If he didn't know any better, he would've assumed that he himself had said that aloud. Luckily, he didn't. And suprisingly, she did.

"The young girl....the twin sister.....died. Though far crueler than

what the leaked videos suggested. " Tamako mutters, her eyes seeming like it was doing its best to hold back her emotions. Meanwhile Beryl didn't seem too suprised, but there was an unspoken depth to her words, like she was denying herself from speaking of how it happened.

" And as for the brother.....I don't know. I left soon after the girl died because I was a coward. The brother probably died as well. "

" I let the both of them die." Her voice turns small. "....I try not to think about it, but sometimes the thought just echoes. This was probably the worst part for me when the trial against the White Room was initiated, I just kept getting reminded of everything I'd done. Of everything I should've done better."

Beryl wondered if this woman deserved comfort and assurance. Maybe after hearing her story, one would say ' go for it ', but then they'd remember that she accepted the job of working in a place like that out of her own volition, all the while knowing how badly the kids were treated. Just because she did one good thing there, doesn't offset anything else that was terrible within that place. Knowing this, it would be hard for anyone to decide whether she really deserved sympathy.

Ah, humanity is always standing on the line of morality..... decisive, yet indecisive. Sure, yet not truly certain. Weighing the scales between the type of person one wishes to be, or to be perceived. The tendency to act on their feelings as judge, jury, and executioner, just because. It was a feeling shared to Beryl too, for he was not exempted from a dilemma shared by the common people. What he's thought may sound cynical, but can you really pinpoint anything particularly bad? If so, how can one fix it?

That was just the flow of the world. The flow of society. Morality that's been dictated by society long ago through the chain of change.

But in the end, people can still make a choice.

" You did your best." Beryl said something he would've surely never said before. He chooses to reassure her, regardless of morals. " Your efforts.... just weren't suited for something like the White Room. I'm sorry for your loss."

Tamako's eyes widened a bit in surprise, it looks like she didn't expect to garner sympathy from Beryl of all people. But she nods in appreciation, in sincere gratitude, but her grief has not subside. It probably never will, but that's okay.

" It's difficult but you have to forgive yourself. "

".....Mn." She hums in attest.

" Heh.... this is quite weird, isn't it? I never would've imagined I'd open myself up to anyone, much less you, like this. Must be the sake talking for me." Her smile lightens just a bit. " But what you said is true. I have to forgive myself, don't I? Even when I still feel chained to my mistakes of the past..... I shouldn't just give up the freedom I have in the present."

Beryl's ears zone in on a specific word she used.

*' Freedom '.*

That was it. That's incredibly spot on with what he was feeling. Freedom, or rather, the lack there of. Just like her, the chains of the White Room set him back even after it's been abolished. And he can't be truly free because.....he has to ask himself, is he really? Who's to say he won't be threatened like this again.

If he were to indulge in his freedom too much, he'd let his guard down. And he'll go through all of that pain again, this time, several times worse. Perhaps that uncertainty within was what's bothering him. Perhaps....' uncertainty ' was the ' unknown feeling ' he'd been building in his heart.

" Hey, Beryl."

He snaps out of his reverie.



" Yes?"

" Do you know why I ended up deciding to establish this cafe?"

" I don't recall you ever explicitly stating the reason. Why?"

Her charcoal coloured eyes trail to their surroundings as she spoke with a reminiscent expression.

" The twin sister.....really wanted to try desserts." She says, " It popped up during one of our conversations. I confessed that I had a particular liking towards desserts, though at the time, I wasn't at all skilled in making it. Let me tell you, her eyes glow so bright when she's fascinated. " Tamako laughs, softly.

And then the laughter disappears, the somberness making its return.

" I created this place, in memory of her. " She stood up and walked around, Beryl stayed in his seat but his eyes followed as she placed her hand on everything-- the tables, the seats, the counter-- every single thing in the cafe. " And just like her, I organized the menu to be just as sweet."

Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes, and maybe some have fallen, who knows. Beryl couldn't see since she mostly had her back turned on him.

" I worked hard to develop the skills necessary to create these wonderful pastries and desserts. And It took years for me to make a new name for myself. As.... Tamako. And I think I don't regret that choice." She sighs, " Although the regrets will continue to haunt me, even more so, when this place was designed in her memory. I'll carry that with me forever. I'll choose to shoulder it all. "

Beryl wondered if freedom is the right to choose.

" I'm glad.....really glad....that the White Room is no more." She turns to him. " Every soul that'd been there, including hers. I like to

think that they're free now."

Or if freedom meant the liberation of people from the selfish rule of another.

For Tamako, she likely encompassed both those definitions. That's what she wants to believe in. This is her definition of freedom.

The freedom of choosing to live on, despite the regrets.

The kind of freedom to be released from her shackles, such as the White Room.

Beryl was quite envious. Although he had freedom as this new entity, there were still chains holding him back. Chains he can't just ignore, chains he doesn't even where it stems from and it bothers him so. What can he do to make it all go away? His past as Kiyotaka is too heavy for the people he held dear-- his siblings could no longer see him as just Beryl anymore because of that.

And with the unexpected abolishment of the White Room, it didn't help. The damage had been done. They know who he is.....and just like back then....

*.....It seems I have no idea.....not a single clue.....of what it's like to be truly free.* Beryl admits.

A part of him is still there. And that part of him followed him to the present. Into his dreams. Into his life. Watching from the side, like a looming shadow that sprouts doubts about his peace. That restrain him from being truly free.

.....

" Haah~ Thank you for listening to the woes of a lady past her prime...." Tamako muttered, sleepily.

Beryl wordlessly pulls the covers over her as she laid down in the makeshift bed that was fortunately installed in her office.

" I feel so much better now, Beryl~ You're a great listener...." She shoots him a toothy grin.

" It's no problem." Beryl tells her. " I hope....that someday these regrets of yours will become less of a burden."

"....I hope the same thing for you, dear."

" Hm?"

" You're....troubled these days still, are you not? It's clear in how empty you look. More so than usual." She heartily giggles, the sake slowly wisping her away to someplace else. " I do hope that whatever worries you at the present, will bid its farewell to you in the near future....."

*Tamako-san....*

" Thank you." Beryl smiles back.

It didn't take long for the drunken stupor to finally send her to sleep. And as Beryl no longer had any reason to stay, he leaves to return to his own home.

*[ Due to him coming home late, he earned quite the scolding from Miyako....]*

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The next day was spent with Beryl continuing with his usual activities. Half paying attention to general ed, hanging out with his buddies, teasing those buddies (and his sister whenever possible), and then annoying the hell out of Arima whenever they'd crossed paths. (Oh he loves this part of the day)

Life was certainly reverting itself back to a time before the White Room went global. Talks about it have faded, the topic no longer garnering much interest among teenagers, besides a few exempted groups that liked to use the existence of the White Room as a base for their conspiracy theories regarding their home country of Japan. It's crazy to think that was previously a controversial situation heard all over the world could be dismissed so quickly once it was all over. Especially within Japan, a country known with the mindset of " excessive progression ", where plenty of people seemingly keep it moving no matter what happens.

"....What is this?" Beryl asks, pointing to the letter presented to him.

" A letter of invitation." Shiranui responds.

" To...?" Beryl trails off, hoping that she'd further elaborate.

" To a fancy party that my crew would be hosting once the drama show we're filming wraps up." She answers.

Beryl raises a brow. " And that is.....when?" He asked, slowly.

"A month and 2 weeks from now." She answered quickly. Her eyes staring eagerly at him.

" You're inviting me to a party that's still far from happening? " Beryl was, for lack of better term, baffled at her act.

"Yes? " Frill tilted her head as if wondering why Beryl would find that weird. Though she dismisses it just as quickly. " It should match along with your schedule too. LoveNow should be done by

that time, correct?"

" Yeah, I suppose so." Beryl wonders if Shiranui planned their schedules to match up this way. It would be expected, seeing as how awfully bold she'd been towards him since they'd began talking not so long ago.

" Why'd you invite me? From the letter it seems to imply that the venue would be filled with other actors such as yourself, as well as crew members, and the like." He narrows his eyes.

" Are you not technically a crew member, as well? "

" I--"

" For not one-- but *two* shows? "

Beryl huffs, his expression indignant. " Okay, first of all, between those two shows I was only officially assigned to one. The other I could've gotten into a legal charge for, which luckily I hadn't." He muttered.

He then proceeds to his next point. " Secondly, my resume as a ' cameraman ' isn't at all impressive to the average person doing the same job. I would surely be out of place."

Just the thought of being in a crowded room full of fancy dresses and tuxes made him wanna barf.

" Lastly, I'm not the biggest fan of events like these. I don't see much of a point being there. "

" Your siblings are welcome to join us." She chimes in.

" How does having them go equate to having me go? " Beryl snaps back.

" It doesn't?" Shiranui wears a suprised expression, which slowly morphed into a thinking pose. " *How strange....I thought that would work....*" She muttered to herself, but it was just loud enough for Beryl to hear.

" What, did you seriously think that wherever my siblings go, I'd follow?" Beryl said, his tone incredulous.

Shiranui shrugs. " It was worth a shot. I'm sure Ruby would've been on board."

" Then why not just invite her?" *Though I doubt she could get in when she hasn't achieved anything big yet,* He refrains from voicing the jab.

" I was planning to, certainly. But I would appreciate it if you were there as well." Shiranui didn't bother trying to hide her intentions.

Somehow I really am starting to think that you see me as more than just an asset to have around on set the more you talk like this.... Beryl thinks. Shiranui was becoming more suspect day by day.

" Well, sorry, but I'll have to reject the invitation." He sighs. " My reasons before still stands."

" I thought it could help you relax." She began, he looks to her curiously at that. " You wouldn't have to talk to everyone there. You could just talk to me. And besides, I thought having you around would make the party....less ' boring '."

" Help me relax, huh. Now why would you do something so thoughtful as that?"

" Are we not friends?" Shiranui asked.

.....

Friends....

Shiranui and I?

Beryl never really thought of her as that. She was more like an acquaintance he'd cross paths with for a limited amount of time per day. Usually during breaks when he goes off to be alone. But she looks to have seen him as her friend. When he'd never personally considered her to be-- no, he can't let his mind linger over this

much further than he has to. He guesses that at this point with their more recent interactions over the past weeks, it constitutes a good enough basis for two people to go from acquaintances to friends.

" Hm....well, I don't normally offer pity in favor of friendship. But I suppose we are." Beryl allows it before sighing. " That's a relief though. It's good that you considered me as a friend despite how I--"

" Well we all have to start somewhere, no? Don't you worry. Friendship is only but the first step." Shiranui interjects, her tone was light, playful, and god be damned-- flirty.

Huh? Beryl blinks in confusion. First step? *First step to what?*

Before Beryl could fire back a response, Shiranui had spun on her heel and began walking away. " I respect your choice about declining my invitation. But just know that it's always open for you to reconsider. See you around, Beryl." Sending him one last sly glance, she slightly smirks in satisfaction before leaving him alone.

Beryl's eye twitches.

What a shrewd girl, he thinks.

Her intentions are confusing, and whatever signs she's giving him is even more so. But he supposes the famous and talented Shiranui Frill will continue to pursue her idea of bringing him to her team. She'll stop at nothing till' she gets what she wants. Even if it means getting closer to him via friendship.

Unfortunately for you, I don't plan to make things easy. Beryl scoffs, accepting the unspoken challenge.

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A man in his 60's rests neatly on the hospital bed, his hands holding a book, as his eyes scour through each paragraph with the hum of a tune that followed, a tune that he was quite fond of. The atmosphere was tranquil in the sterile quarters, despite wires being connected to his arms, he felt so at peace that it was barely an inconvenience to be dull about. It was a mundane worry that doesn't take away his peace whatsoever.

Even when he could hear it coming for him. The whispers....that he'd soon--

*Click!* The door to his room gently opens, and with another resounding click, it closes. This prompts the old man to look over curiously to see just who had the audacity to enter his room without knocking. He'd thought better that the nurses in this hospital would have more manners, what if he was changing? *Though he was incapable of doing that alone in the first place, but still it's the thought that counts!*

His eyes squint ahead, but he could barely make out the figure. It was all too blurry, but he knew it was a woman from her form.

"Who goes there?" His voice was firm, as it echoes in the quiet room. He can hear the pitter patter of shoes that, to which he assumes, was walking towards him. It caused a sense of unease to well up within him, this felt all too suspicious to be calm about.

So he readies his book just in case. This better be a nurse or else he's gonna give whoever this person is a nasty concussion! From a book, no less!



*" You can drop the book, Father. It's just me."*

The man's eyes widened upon hearing her voice. The figure finally steps into view, to where his eyes could properly make out, and a smile blooms on his lips upon seeing who it was. A soft smile was permeated on her face too. He couldn't speak the words, his old mind was still processing her, but his mouth moved to ask the question of ' Is it you? ' though no words came out, and so it was mute.

But she seemed to have understood, and nodded accordingly.

The man's smile couldn't get any wider as he says,

*" Yuki..... it warms my heart to see my daughter again."*

.....

Yuki pulled up a chair and sat beside her father's bed. Her amethyst eyes glancing over the several monitors around him, checking to see if everything was in order.

Mr. Sagami, seeing that, smirks and reaches over to flick her head. She flinched for a moment, before looking at him all confused.

" I'm okay. Stop worrying so much. This old man isn't going to die so easily, you know?" He assures her.

" Just making sure...." Yuki muttered back before sighing.

*Such a worrywart*, he thinks.

Mr. Sagami chuckles at her, " You know, if you worry too much, your hair will turn grey before you even hit 40." He says to her.

Yuki narrows her eyes before digging her fingers through her own hair, and plucking a strand, before showing it to her father. It was grey. Mr. Sagami raises a brow, wondering if she really needed to

do that.

" Persecuting the White Room for half my life isn't an easy job. One can't help it if their hair turns grey due to the stress." Yuki shrugs. " By 25, a lot of it had already turned grey. So I dyed it. "

Now it was Mr. Sagami who was worried. " Yuki..... you should've taken care of yourself better. I know that shutting down that facility was your priority above all else, even above me. But as your father, I worry...."

She snorts in amusement. " Worrywart." She calls him. " It's okay, though. It's not like I completely disregarded my own health, doing that would've just been detrimental overall to my plans. I did at least..... the bare-minimum."

As for what the ' bare-minimum ' meant to Yuki..... Mr. Sagami decides not to ask. He guesses he'd only be left with disappointment.

" Well, it's been a few years since you last visited me. How long will you be staying this time?" He asked her.

" The entire day at least. And I plan to visit at least twice a week from now on to make up for all of that lost time." She pulls out a laptop from her bag and a couple of files, " And....I hope you don't mind...?" She indicates her work.

" Do as you wish." Mr. Sagami leans back further to his bed. " Just keep this old man company."

Yuki nods before setting up her little work corner by his side.

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Mr. Sagami can't help but smile proudly at her as she worked. Yuki has grown to be a very beautiful, smart, and strong woman despite all of the adversities she's faced at such a young age. She was growing up to look just as beautiful as her mother who had long passed away. With that, Mr. Sagami's smile is tinged with a

slight reminisce, as he recalls the memories of his lovely wife. It was a shame that heaven had taken her too soon.

And her last wish. Oh, he remembers it too clearly. She wanted to make up for the mistake of leaving their young daughter at the White Room facility, the place both he and her worked at in the past. She shouldn't have--- they shouldn't have given up Yuki in the first place. He was lucky enough to have been forgiven for that by his own daughter, though, the damage had already been done.

.....

" Yuki, now that the white room is shut down. What do you plan to do from here? " He asked her.

Yuki's fingers stop typing for a moment. Quickly recalling this same question that had been asked by Shiro, to which she had given no answer to.

" Well, the answer is obvious. I'll have to help out with the aftermath of this whole mess. There's still plenty to clean up." But unlike then, she makes up an answer on the spot in an instant. Not wanting to get caught off guard like that again, not wanting to dwell further into the deepest truths just yet.

" Ah...." Her father hums in thinking. " Well, when that is all wrapped up. Don't you think you should start thinking about finding a husband soon?" He asked.

" A husband?" Yuki had not given a single thought to the notion. " I doubt there'd be a man willing to take someone like me." She dismisses it quickly.

But Mr. Sagami wasn't going to let her off so easily, as he continues to prod. " Yuki, it's a pretty big world out there, you know? I'm sure that there's someone willing to. Besides, you're not getting any younger, and that's coming from me!"

In essence, he had a point. A common goal for most people is to find a partner they could depend on and work through the journey of life together. *For most people, that is...*

"....I don't think such a thing would be possible for someone like me." Yuki replies, " I'm far too busy for the average person. And the weight I carry is far too heavy a burden for anyone to understand..... with that in mind, don't you think it'd be better if I just live alone? Nobody would have to be bothered with someone as troublesome as me. "

Her father frowns. " Could you really handle that?"

" I don't need love in this life to sustain me."

" You say that, but wasn't it love that drove you to end the nightmare for everyone once and for all?"

"....."

Yuki turns her head to meet her father's knowing gaze.

" I see..." He chuckles. " It seems to me that even after all these years, your heart still yearns for him."

"....So what if it does?" She asked back, it was a truth she had no reason to hide.

" Nothing. I was just asking, is all...." Her father sighs. " After all, who am I to start giving advice about moving on, when I've yet to do so myself? My heart belongs to your mother alone. There is none of me left to give to anyone else."

" I apologize for my prodding. There's no need to force yourself if you don't want to, I'll support you either way." He tells her, sincerely.

"....Thank you." Yuki smiles in appreciation.

A pause.

" Father, why did you ask me about this? I'm sure that you have unspoken intentions in doing so." She asked him, not with the intent of antagonizing him, but curious.

*How perceptive as always,* Her father nervously laughs. Looks like he really can't get away with anything from his daughter. At least....for most things.

" Well, I noticed something quite off about you ever since you came here to visit. You've been sporting quite a strange expression on your face. And why joy isn't the particular emotion I would expect you to wear alone after your victory, but why the melancholy? " He asked.

"...." *Looks like he figured that out too....* Yuki sighs.

He beckons her to come closer. Yuki seemed reluctant, but the more he asked, the more her body responded so naturally as she went over to him, scooting her seat closer to the side of his bed. When she was finally near, he reaches out to grasp her hand, seemingly comforting her with the rubbing of his thumb over her knuckles that had been hardened over a decade of chasing.

" Is something wrong? You can tell me." He asked her, gently. " Or you can choose not to. I won't mind." Still, he won't try and force her to open up if she doesn't want to.

Yuki turns her head away, opting to look elsewhere, much to her father's slight dejection. He'd think that after so many years of doing his best to support her, and after everything has ended, that she would be more open to him about her feelings. He wants nothing more than to help her. He promised to.

He sighs, maybe this wasn't the right the time. But if not now, then when? He guesses he'll have to wait like always.

Just when he was about to let go of her hand, Yuki speaks. And as she spoke, his grip was reciprocated.

" I...."

He waits.

"....I don't know...."

Her voice was small, it sounded pitiful and weak. So unlike the Yuki he has seen grow into a determined young woman with a fire to achieve her revenge. Now that the fire was gone, now that there was no need for a spark, all that was left were the ashes of her very being. Sitting beside him. Downcast.

" I should be happy. You're right. But.....I..." she struggles to say, " I can't."

" It's like everything in me has just turned stagnant once it was all over." She mutters, much to her reluctance. " Like I'm not satisfied with the way things are now....at least not completely. I'm happy that I did what I did, and it's not like I have regrets there..... but the question keeps popping up; *What now?* "

" I'm lost...." Her amethyst eyes began to look dull as she turned to her father, almost with a pleading, helpless gaze. " I'm lost with myself. I don't know what to do from here."

" I never had plans of finding a new job, or to fall in love, or to create long-lasting friendships. At the time, those things didn't relate to my goal, so I had no care for it..." She looks down. " But now, heh, I'm kinda regretting not taking those many opportunities back then."

" I'm left to wonder if I'm truly free as I believed myself to be."

Her father listened carefully, never once taking his eyes off of her expression. It was clear she wanted to find an answer; a new purpose to follow. But that's not an easy thing to establish. This was his chance to help her and yet.....what can he say? What can he do? Listening won't be enough. It will never be.

".....You are free, Yuki."

She looks to him, leveling their gazes again.

" And because of you, so many other people are free. Those children are free." His other hand reaches for her face, even if it

pained him slightly. " It's a difficult step for you to take. But I'm confident you'll find your new sense of purpose. You're strong, and smart, and deep down, very much kind."

He pats her cheek gently.

" You make me so proud. I hope you know that." He smiles. " Try opening up your heart to more people instead of closing it off, and maybe then you'll see it as I do. Try smiling more too. Do you know that when you smile you're so much more beautiful? When you smile, it reminds me so much of your mother's."

Yuki hides her disappointment. Though she appreciates his efforts, it did nothing to quell her anxiety within. Deep down, that discontent with the way things are, remains present. Not even the warm touch nor the kind comfort gifted by her father could help in erasing that. Even he, her number one supporter, fails to understand her.

"....I hope I do." Still, out of sentiment, she shows that she's willing to give his ideas a shot. " I'll do my best to do that more."

*And hopefully my progress will show...*

~~~~~

Beryl was finally able to leave the classroom. He'd been tasked with extra cleaning duty after being caught sleeping in class a couple of times. But could you really blame him? The teachers were relaying topics he'd learned when he was a kindergartener in his previous life. It was obviously gonna bore him. So either he sleeps or daydreams. This time, he chose sleeping. But at the same time, cleaning, had helped take his mind off things. Distracted him for a good while.

But that was that. Now he has to go home. Alone, this time, since apparently Ruby and Aqua had gone home without him. With the intention of helping to boost Ruby and Arima's idol channel to get

some more traction with that muscular guy with the duck hat, Pieyon. From what he's read up on him he's a popular kid's channel. At this point in time, Arima would've probably expressed her doubts over that guy, but as soon as he shows the amount of money he makes per year....

Beryl chuckles. Perhaps the only regret today was that he wouldn't be there to make fun of her.

Maybe next time.....

.....

Hm?

Beryl pauses in his steps, as he looks towards a figure that was a few meters from him. He identified the pink hair almost immediately, and realized it was Kotobuki Minami, a person he recalls to be Ruby's current 'bestie' in this school. She seemed to be too preoccupied to notice him, or too busy to really care enough to acknowledge him, as she was seemingly trying to take multiple selfie poses of the wonderful view behind her, with the gentle hue of the sunset and the falling of sakura petals.

Beryl watched in amusement for a while, he can over hear her muttering " *No, this isn't it!* " or " *Aw shucks, my face looks weird here....*". At some point during his staring, Beryl decided that he should probably leave her to her own business and that he should be heading home now.

Yet, on a whim, his feet takes him to her.

" Kotobuki," He calls for her attention.

" Oh!" Minami repels back a bit in surprise, her eyes scaling the tall frame of Beryl's before finally locking contact with his alluring golden browns. " Beryl, you're still here? I had thought that you've gone home with Ruby and Aqua already..." She wondered.

Beryl shakes his head in response. " Nah, the teacher caught me sleeping in his class. He had enough of that, so he decided to assign me to extra cleaning duty, I just finished and was heading out till I saw you here." Minami nods along, understanding his explanation, and then thought it was Beryl's turn to ask. " What about you? Why are you still here?"

" Oh, well, hehe....kinda embarrassing but..." A pink hue adorns her face, the color so similar to her hair. " I was wantin' to snap a good ol' picture of myself with this view..... everything looks so right today. So I didn't wanna miss the chance."

She sighs in disappointment though upon seeing the failed pics on her phone. " Though..... things don't seem to be going to plan this time. How embarrassing."

Beryl looks down to her phone, and indeed, he can understand why she'd be disappointed. Objectively speaking, the photos weren't bad in any way, if it were done by the average person then it would be considered quite good. But for a model like Kotobuki she must have higher standards with these type of things.

" You got a pretty high-end phone," Beryl remarks. " Though that's to be expected from a model, huh." He adds.

Minami shows a modest reaction as she smiled before shaking her head. " Well, I suppose I just got lucky enough to become one." She said.

" Did you want to become a model at all?" He asked out of curiosity.

" Well.....a half-yes, and a half-no on that." She laughs. " Don't get me wrong! Becoming a model was probably one of the best outcomes for someone like me. And I love the job, getting to wear a variety of outfits, and being shown on magazines..... even though that last part does kinda embarrass me sometimes. But it's business, so I can't fight that, can I?" She explains, and then she regains a bit of her composure from before and continues. " But actually, I'm just really into this sort of thing. I like to take pictures. Not because I wanna show off my beauty or anything.... I just like to be one with the view. The wonderful background. See if I perfectly mold into it, ya know? "

He nods.

" This takes good quality pictures." Beryl concludes after checking through the phone. " And you do mold with the background. So what's the problem?" He asked.

Minami scratches her cheek, chuckling nervously. " Well.... I don't know. Something about the way I smile in these pictures."

Beryl blinks.

" The way you smile?"

" O-Oh, forget about it! Haha! it's kinda hard to explain and I doubt you'd understand..." Minami shakes her head, as she began reaching for her phone back.

But to her surprise, Beryl steps away, with her phone still in hand.

Huh? Wait, is he going to run off with my phone--?!

" How about you pose like you did last time by the tree over there?" He suddenly proposed.

A pause.

".....What?" She asked.

Beryl goes to her camera app and fiddles with some of the settings. " Just do as I say, Kotobuki." He said, boredly.

Albeit confused, Minami follows nonetheless. She stands by the Sakura tree once more, with the dawning of the sun accentuating her appearance in a beautiful color. She fiddles nervously, feeling a lot more uncomfortable now that Ruby's younger triplet brother was taking pictures of her for her, she wasn't particularly too close to the guy so this should come off as quite the strange interaction.

Not to mention just how handsome this guy was in particular. Hey, she's a young girl at heart, you know! It's a bit difficult to *not*

consider him dating material from his looks alone.

" You know what I think?" Beryl stills the frame.

" What?" She asked, snapping out of her daze.

" Not a single thing was wrong with your smile in these pictures you took. You looked pretty in all of them."

Huh?

" And I'd even go as far as to say that you did more than just mold with the background." He eyes her. " You made the background look even more beautiful with your presence."

Eh?

Her face turns red.

Although flustered, Minami was left unaware that for a moment, a smile had formed on her face. And in that same moment followed the sound of a single tap from Beryl on her camera.

.....

" Here ya go. How does this look?" Beryl hands her back her phone.

" O-Oh..." Minami shakes away all the unnecessary....VERY unnecessary thoughts at the present moment, after pushing those aside she takes a look at the picture Beryl took and....

" This is amazing!" She exclaimed after scanning the image carefully. She initially assumed that Beryl must've overdone it with whatever setting he was fiddling with in her camera but that didn't seem to be the case. Sure, there are obvious differences but....

It only accelerated the background's beauty, so none of it got tarnished. And when it comes to her face....

Wow. Even Minami didn't know someone could capture her smile like that.

" You can't simply force emotions. No matter how much you practice at it, no matter how hard you try to perfect it, because it's your occupation to do so." Beryl tunes in. " The best smiles are....involuntary. They just happen. And they happen without you being conscious of it. It's the purity that really sells it."

" You're....so wise." Minami remarks, absolutely stunned. " Where did you learn something like that? A book?"

" A person." He answers.

" Who?" Minami asks.

" My mother." Beryl's unknowingly curl up just a little at the mention of her. Oh, the memory serves him clear. The day he saw a glimpse of her true self, a real smile, that shined brighter than everything he'd ever known.

The smile that caused a crack into his previous philosophy. The smile that cracked away at the person he used to be.

" I see...." Minami nods. " She sounds like a wise woman then!"

" No, she was a clumsy mess of a woman who had a record of misnaming her children." Beryl cuts in.

" Wait what?" Minami blinks in confusion at that statement. *If that's the case then she sounds like a horrible mother....*

But if she really was a horrible mother..... then why would Beryl smile the way he did just now at the thought of her?

" Well, I should be heading home now. I'll see you around, Kotobuki-san." Beryl offers a lazy nod before attempting to turn around.

Minami nods again, in a daze. But then the image of Ruby flashed inside her head for a moment, she recalls the girl complaining a couple of weeks ago about Beryl's attitude in recent times. Should she ask about that? Ruby didn't personally send her to do a mission on it or something...and this feels imposing of her to do. But then again, Ruby is her friend. Minami should at least get an idea of how Beryl may be feeling these days just to help soothe Ruby's worry.

" H-Hold on!" Minami calls after him, stopping him, and causing him to glance at her curiously.

" Um.....wow.... you actually stopped..." Minami coughs awkwardly before continuing, she should just get it over with before her blush becomes even more obvious! " I was curious about something, actually! It's something I've been meaning to ask..."

" What is it?"

" Weird question to ask, but..... are you feeling okay these days? Please don't ask me why I'm asking you this! Just answer the question...?"

She immediately cringes. *Way to make it obvious that something suspicious is going on, Minami. You go girl....*

" I'm feeling fine." Beryl answers, cocking his head to the side. " Did Ruby ask you to do this?"

Oh crud, he saw right through me... Minami shuffles, embarrassed. " N-No, she didn't! I was just....erm..."

He shakes his head.

" Lying doesn't seem to suit you, Kotobuki." Beryl chuckles. " You're too innocent for that."

Ah, that rung true, Minami agreed. Ever since she was young she had sported a naive personality from the get-go, and she was a horrible liar.

" Well, you can go and tell Ruby that I'm doing fine. Always have been." Beryl assures her. " She's just worrying about the little things. Everyone's got their bad days, no?"

" Well, I can't argue against that." She agrees before bowing her head apologetically. " Sorry if I came off as annoying!"

She was incredibly flustered, Beryl surmises. If any other boy were to stand in his place now they would be awestruck by the sight. She was....quite cute, to put it the least. Her mannerisms and personality were interesting, almost akin to an oblivious baby deer that lives in a world where the rules of survival were cruel and dire for the rest of them.

.....*Well, that analogy came out of nowhere.* Beryl decides to stop there.

" It's not a problem. I'll see you around." He bids her goodbye, and she bids him back. This time, the distance was finally growing wider.

And again..... he's just left to ponder to himself.

~~~~~

It was late at night, and Yuki was busy working through plenty of files sent by her agency abroad and from the Japanese department. The visit she had made to her father really cleared her mind, knowing she always has the support of at least one person, help placed most of her doubts aside.

It's been two weeks since she won the case and abolished the

White Room, arresting all the people involved in its creation, and retrieving all the subjects from each generation. And using the money Mika had given her, she decided to buy some land to create proper burials for the subjects that passed, that includes Kiyotaka. As well as for the rest of the money left unused, she decides to use it as financial aid to help in the recovery process. To build a recovery institution for the victims.

*The White Room had warped many of their personalities....*

From kids to teenagers, they have no idea to do with themselves now that they're free. They've never gotten to experience what it's like to be a " normal " person, and so they struggle to reconnect back to the world. Much like Yuki herself, unfortunately.

A faint frown began etching itself across her lips as she thought about all the calls she received about the recovery process. She knew things weren't going to be easy in this regard, but....

During the early stages of the recovery process came the distribution and organization of where the kids should go. A huge majority of them were given away by choice, while a minor percentage of them were stolen from their homes. The former between the two was first adopted into normal orphanages and some even made it to foster homes in a faster time than expected, it seemed like their stories caught the world's sympathy, which was what Yuki had initially hoped for. But then complaints begin to surge from those foster homes.....that the kids were making things awfully difficult for the families to handle. They moved almost robot-like around the house, and sometimes, a flare of emotional breakdown would scare the adults and thus causing the destruction of furniture and such. The same was said for the kids that were still in orphanages at the time. They didn't know how to interact with more.... normal children that didn't go through what they had to. A lot of those kids were accidentally injured due to false play and misunderstandings.

And so those kids were promptly sent back to the Japanese department.

As for the minority that reunited with their biological families..... it didn't go so well either. Confusion and resentment piled within their hearts, and again a misunderstanding was what stopped their connection. Children were still children. They went through pain, suffering, and are left to wonder why they deserved it at all. the White Room must've influenced their way of thinking when it came to understanding the ' truth ' of why they were there, they were led to the belief that all children who were sent to the White Room were legally disposed by their parents. Throughout childhood, that memory was forever imprinted. And so no joy or compassion could form within their hearts to reconcile a long awaited bond, and just like the previous, destruction was what followed.

Yuki sighs, pausing her work for a moment to lean her head on her hands in slight frustration. She wishes she could've maybe saved them earlier, but had she acted too hastily, the plan wouldn't have worked out at all. She won but not without costs. And she has to deal with the consequences. She knows that.....but....

***Riiiiinnngggg!***

Her phone buzzed beside her. She reads the caller ID and recognizes it was one of the supervisors in the recovery institute calling her, most likely to deliver her daily report that Yuki instructed her to provide always since this whole process began. Yuki taps the phone and places it on speaker.

-- **Hello, Ms. Sagami?** -- Came the voice of a woman. Yuki recognized her as the leading supervisor, Hanami.

" I'm here. What is it? " Yuki responds, her professional tone, firm.

-- **I called to give you my daily report.** --

" Go ahead. I'm listening."

-- **Ahem. Today from what all of us observed from all 25 generations of White Room students, there seemed to be minor improvements happening around the more younger generations. It could be attributed due to their still**



impressionable age group, but it still remains difficult to truly purge the teachings of the previous head, Ayanokouji Atsuomi, from the deep recesses of their psyche. Our examinations show that fear is still the only driving force behind their will to live. We've introduced several hobbies to these number of students, but only some seemed curious enough to try. Others found no interest and instead chose to do what they'd done in the White Room previously... --

".....Seems like this will take a year's worth of recovery at best." Yuki says, skeptically. It was good to hear that minor improvements were made at least, as it was better than nothing..... but taking in the bigger picture here.... the progress is unbearably slow.

-- The hesitation was mostly observed from the older generations from 1 to 10. Their psyche has been too deeply rooted. They've expressed the most doubt in themselves whether it was possible to change. They're the hardest to convince. --

" Well, that's to be expected. They've been there from the beginning, and many students left from the generations before mine are now in their 30's or whatnot. They've grown old and developed stubborn minds.... and they've simply lost connection with the outside world as a whole." Yuki sighs, leaning her cheek onto her palm. " It'll be a difficult task especially to reintegrate the older students back into society. Where they could live normal. If it's even possible to."

-- Ms. Sagami.... you seem to have even more doubts than us?

--

Yuki hums. " It's only the logical possibility here. It's likely impossible to reintegrate them back at all. As for the teenagers, something could be done for them. They may not be as easy as the younger students but they'd be much easier to change than the older ones. They have a bigger chance of regaining their grounds." She said.

-- You have a point, Ms. Sagami. But may I pose a solution

we thought of to you as well? --

" What is it?"

-- Why don't you come and visit the institution for once? Meet all the students in person. We theorized that perhaps an interaction with their ' saviour ' could help speed up the process of change. From what we observed, it's likely possible that we alone have a short chance of actually having them listen and understand. We..... never went with what you had to go through. You know the ins and outs of each curriculum. Not to mention you were from the 4th generation too, if there's anyone they might listen to; It's you --

"..... I doubt that." Yuki mutters. " Sorry, but I don't--" She was bluntly cut off.

-- Ma'am, please reconsider! Ever since the institution was established, you have not once visited them. These kids don't understand what it's like to have free choice over their lives when they'd been monitored so closely by their instructors. They don't understand what it's like to being able to live free. But if *you* show up then maybe they could! After all, you were in the outside far longer than they have. You know what it's like to be free and you can teach them that! --

Yuki wore a sullen frown upon hearing the word ' Free ' once more. If only Hanami knew that Yuki was the furthest person away from real freedom.....who is she to teach these kids that when she's realized just how trapped she is even after everything that'd transpired 2 weeks ago. By destroying the white room, she completed her purpose. And yet she lives now. So what is she to do?

*....Freedom meant nothing to Yuki, did it....?*

-- And I'm sure in due time with your more direct approach, we could shape them back into normal citizens- --

" I'm afraid I will have to decline you on that."

**-- Huh? --**

" I'm far too busy on my end to spare the time to visit. And I don't believe I'm the right person to help for the recovery stages. "

**-- But...---**

" There's still plenty of messes that the White Room left behind. Still plenty of history I have to uncover and amend from the previous director's files, as well as my own personal agendas that stretch far beyond the White Room. This is why I hired you and the others to take care of this job. To take care of them. If I really could help them the way you're suggesting, don't you think I would've done so earlier? "

Her tone was cold, and unnerving, to the ears of the other end of the line.

**-- Ah.....m-my apologies.....I didn't mean to impose this on you....I just thought that....--**

As Hanami continued to sputter her apologies for being a nuisance. Yuki cringed from the way she's treating her. She felt pity because the woman didn't deserve it, but Yuki had to grow thick skin over the years, and as she did so did her coldness towards others. In order to get things moving your way, often times you'll have to *make* it, through whatever means.

" Do not apologize further. Just remember that I gave you your job because I'm busy with mine. I'm doing with what I can from my end too. Supplying the necessary fundings to support the building as well as searching for reliable solutions to give those kids a normal life. Do not question me again, are we clear?"

**-- Understood, ma'am.....--**

Yuki sighs. *Well that's done....* she thinks.

" If you have nothing more to say. Then I'll be ending this call."

She says, ready to tap the hang up button fully expecting that Hanami had nothing more to report.

That is, until her voice boomed in a panic.

**-- W-Wait! There's one more I actually wanted to tell you, Ms. Sagami! --**

Yuki's finger stops just a inch away from the button. With a raised brow, she leans back to her seat again. " What is it? " She asks.

**-- We recorded something strange with one of the students from the 22nd generation. It was just another daily therapy session like usual..... until that particular student mentioned something that we didn't think much about at first, but then he insisted on repeating it....--**

" Who is the student?" Yuki's interest was piqued now.

**-- A boy named Yuto. This was especially suprising because when we first received him and began treatment....he was awfully timid to the point we thought he was mute. He always seemed nervous and scared. Like something was out to get him. --**

**-- And then....just a few days ago....during our session. He suddenly mentioned something strange. He mentioned about the man who will return to get those from his generation and onwards. --**

" Huh?" Yuki stills.

**-- He kept repeating it and repeating it.... and right now we don't know what to make of it. He seems really scared, it's awfully concerning. Poor child.... --**

" Could he be referring to Ayanokouji Atsuomi? "

**-- We thought so too. But that didn't seem to be the case. When we tried to understand, tried to help him, and ask. He couldn't say a word. He just kept mumbling that same sentence about a man who'll come to get them. --**

Yuki thinks carefully about all this information. It does sound concerning. But it could also just be a mental instability within the student, she's known a few from her own generation that had gone deluded once the curriculum got to them....

It was an awful process to watch back when she was still her young and naive self. The fear, and the tears, she cried for them as they were her friends too. Friends who were taken away, never to be seen again.

.....

But now it's incredibly unlikely. The files she observed from the White Room generations after the 4th have been relatively more stable in comparison. Which could mean...

" It's possible the child may just be experiencing post trauma. Keep up with the sessions, give him space, and show him that you and the others will always be there to listen. It's not unlikely to bet on the chance that what he's repeating were previous threats from his instructors back in training. Accounting the fact he may also have a weak mind..... yes, I do think this may just be a result of post traumatic stress."

**--....I see. You could be right. Thank you for your input, Ms. Sagami. --**

" Keep at it. Don't forget to report to me tomorrow as well."

**-- Understood. Have a nice evening. --**

The call ends.

.....

*Could it be possible....?*

*No. The White Room is finished. There's no reason for me to dig*

*further.*

*But then again....*

*Part of the reason why I've been feeling so uneasy is because I haven't found this certain entity.* Yuki crosses her arms in deep thinking. The entity she is thinking about was none other than Atsuomi's missing 'right hand man', **Tsukishiro**. None of the records give clues to the identity of a man named Tsukishiro, none at all. It was all too strange.

Mika would've had no reason to lie about the existence of such a person.... Her fear seemed genuine. As well as Atsuomi's jeering remark that the White Room is yet to end. But if that's the case, then how would it even begin again? Yuki took care of every possible measure to stop its resurface..... so what's he confident about? Or rather, *what could she have missed?*

.....

No. She shouldn't be thinking too deeply into this. It wouldn't make sense to even theorize a man as feared as that would be able to bypass her security. She's got eyes and ears everywhere related to the White Room, and with her recent victory, she has completely seized control of what remains of the battlefield. Even if one were to send an entire army of super agents against her, she will have prepared a back up for that too with her vast amount of connections in and outside of Japan.

Hell, for all she knows, Tsukishiro might've just left Atsuomi's side altogether. Or died off somewhere. Leaving that bastard director's last words as nothing more but a mere bluff to mess with her head. Besides what could he want from the 22nd generation, specifically, if the kid's words were true? Yuki has read the files of each generation, and almost none of them were anything noteworthy that could compare to someone from the Fourth Generation, which was honored as the generation that had achieved multiple milestones for the White Room's constitution, most of which were done by one student alone-- *Ayanokouji Kiyotaka*.

....

Just the thought of his name made Yuki's heart feel that familiar ache. She couldn't run away from it now that her job was.... mostly finished. Her selfish desires of avenging him drove her this far, but now that it's been achieved, it only reminds her of how empty she really is a person. It only reminds her that she's still there in that white space.

*It's getting to her just a bit.....just enough for her to think that maybe....*

*" No, I shouldn't finish that thought...."* She murmurs. It was a bad omen after all. She shouldn't undo everything she did just because she's left unsatisfied by the ending.

She should put in the effort to try and move on anyhow--

***Ringggggg!***

*Huh?*

When Yuki glanced to see who was calling her this time, her expression morphed into one of surprise. It took her another second to finally answer the call.

" S-Sagami....you finally answered....oh thank god you answered..." A sob came from the other end of the line, only deepening Yuki's concern, as she didn't expect to hear this type of emotion from this certain person. Ever.

**" Mika, what's wrong?"**

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Another week has passed, the crew of LoveNow spent the next episodes filming scenes in a different location from school. To up the romantic value, as well as putting the relationship of Noboyuki and Sumi front, line, and center for the viewers to see. They'd become a popular pair to watch according to those following the show, so in typical business fashion, the best decision a director could make is to give them the spotlight.

That didn't mean all the other actors were simply pushed aside. They had their moments too. But their interactions with each other is being pressured to produce more value for the show as well, it won't take too long until the popularity of Sumi and Noboyuki might drop down, and when it does there has to be another couple willing to replace the spotlight.

So far, the closest pairing to achieve that type of role would be Aqua and Mem-cho, since they seem to have some chemistry there. Though more platonic than romantic. But viewers would delude themselves enough to believe that it might just develop into the latter. Unfortunately, neither Aqua nor Mem-Cho seems too interested in having romantic development between each other to splurge forth so.....

Moving on, Beryl focuses on the other two members instead. Kurokawa and Morimoto. Those two were the least interesting

members of the cast, unfortunately. And it shows in how many times they've been tagged in the internet, their personalities in comparison to the others is just underwhelming. Morimoto had this cool mysterious instrumentalist charm going on at first, but when you strip him off of that, then he's just kinda bland.

Though, he doesn't seem to care too much. Beryl recalls him saying that he's only here for the money during their shared lunch breaks. So maybe worrying about him shouldn't be much of a priority.

Kurokawa however....

Now that girl cared. Like, seriously cared. A lot.

Beryl can't fathom the amount of notes she's been taking since the show even began, he estimates it to be around the 100s now. It's unbelievable how dedicated and sincere she is to her craft as an actress, even though this isn't exactly the type of platform she excels in, it's clear in her almost desperate efforts that she's willing to always go the extra mile.

To the point it may just be concerning....

.....

"Aqu-tan, you're okay with not joining the struggle for Yukipon's affection?" Mem-Cho teases. "If you wanna get popular, you'd probably be better off hanging with her than with me, don't you agree?"

"I've got no complaints here. I'll just play safe until the show ends." Aqua responds, closing his eyes and relaxing himself. "I never intended to find love in this setting after all."

"Mm....I guess we can both agree on that, hehe! We all have our objectives here after all..." Mem-Cho nodded in understanding.

" Hey, can I ask you something personal?" Mem-Cho suddenly opens up.

Aqua, sensing the change of tone in her usually light hearted and silly voice, opens his eyes and glances at her. " Depends on what it is..." he answers.

" I might sound nosy but.... well, I also asked this question to Goldy and he answered, so I thought maybe I should ask you too because--"

" Just out with it already." Aqua said, leaving no time for stalling.

".....Is everything with you and Goldy alright?" She genuinely asks.

.....Now he kinda wished she was stalling. He sighs.

" Is it that obvious?" He decides to acknowledge the fact that there's still this drift between them, even after the White Room ordeal should become a long gone topic for most people by now. Move on and all that. But....

It's kinda hard to separate your brother from his past life as an experiment meant to be the pinnacle of humanity....

" Haha, well, I'm an older sister myself. So I can kinda pick up on it when others don't." Aqua is the second person Mem-cho has confessed to about this.

" I didn't expect you to be an older sister." Aqua showed some faint surprise. The vibes she gave off was that of an obnoxious middle child more-like..... somewhat the same as Ruby.

" Suprising? Well let's not make this about me. We can go into the topic some other time.....anyways," Mem-Cho clears her throat. " What's going on between you two? For a while it almost seemed like things were going back to normal with you guys.... or maybe

you two were just that good at hiding it-- but my point is! The tension is getting more obvious every time we're on set!"

" It's....complicated." Aqua sighs.

" Siblings fight a lot, but you can't just leave it unresolved, no?" Mem-cho challenges.

" It's more than that." Aqua frowns. " If it was a sibling fight then things would be a lot more simple. But this has more to do wrong with me than it has any to him. " He spat out, a hint of frustration was clear in his tone, which suprised Mem-Cho.

Aqua realizes he messed up, and looks away.

" Sorry, I lost my cool a bit. I didn't...mean to yell at you." he awkwardly resigns. This had been bugging for far too long.

Mem-Cho stares at him silently in awe. This was the first time Aqua has seriously expressed an emotion akin to frustration, she always recognized him as the calm sarcastic guy, because that's what he's always been! But he, along with Beryl, seem to show different traits of themselves whenever a problem concerned the siblings. Mem-Cho thought it was sweet, and she couldn't help but let out a somber smile.

" The fact you got mad just proves my point, you know?" She gently tells him. Almost akin to an adult comforting a child. " I won't ask what's going on between you two. I didn't ask of that from Beryl too. It's your business and certainly not mine but....I do prefer it when you two get along. So whatever it is, maybe find it in yourself to take the first step to reconcile. Even if it isn't your fault."

" Siblings.....are important. I see my siblings as a part of my soul." Mem-Cho hums. " I think that applies to you too, especially when you're triplets. Heh."

A part of your soul.... Aqua repeats.

" So much happens in life, you know? You gotta stay close to your siblings because they're there with you every step of the way. Sure,

there's fights here and there too, but I know there's love between you guys the same as mine. You never know what happens to family..... one day they might just be gone in the blink of an eye. "

"...."

Her words reinvoke a memory Aqua liked to keep hidden from himself. The same memory that drives him in the current day, is also what scares him the most. They say history repeats, and Mem-Cho unknowingly implies it could be true. If it does repeat..... will the shade of midnight purple be replaced with color of blonde dyed in red? Will those stars that remind him of the endless space be replaced by the eyes of two beautiful gems, either Ruby or Beryl? it haunts him. He likes to keep it buried away but it doesn't mean it's never there.

.....Damn it. To think he'd have to concede to Mem-Cho's point.

" You're right." He finally releases a sigh of relief. " Thanks....I.... I needed to hear that." He was so involved in the chaos in his heart, he didn't listen to the obvious. Someone needed to do that for him instead.

Mem-Cho nods, smiling cheerfully again. She was satisfied with seeing Aqua's change of expression, to a more less confused one. She hopes that this time their bond will get better.

.....

Meanwhile, Beryl receives a text.

~~~~~

After a week had passed, the crew had finally returned back to the city. It was 4 pm by the time they got back to the studio to finish up some last round filming, before they were finally dismissed to go to their respective homes.

However....

" Hey guys, good work this week! How about we eat out again? This time it's my treat." Noboyuki announces.

" I was just thinking of that. I'm down to go." Sumi smiles, a blush blessing her face, as she seems to have formed genuine feelings for him along the way somehow.

" You're treating? Well, I can't miss this one now can I." Morimoto smirks. It's not everyday that Noboyuki treats people instead of leeching off of them.

" Oh, I'll come!" Mem-Cho peppily raises her hand. " You should come too, Kurokawa-san!" She says turning to the blue haired actress.

" S-Sure! So long as you guys don't mind." Kurokawa smiles in affirmation.

" Akkun? Beryl? What about you two?" Noboyuki asked.

" Sure, why not." Aqua shrugs before glancing to Beryl. " You're not going though, right?"

" Yeah. I won't be able to go this time." Beryl nods.

" Oh~? And why is that?" Mem-cho smirks.

" I have to meet someone." Beryl asks and heads out while waving his hand. " I'll see you guys around."

" Alright, bye!"

" Hey....." Sumi giggles. " Do you think Beryl might have a secret girlfriend we don't know about~?" She wiggles her eye brows at Aqua.

" That's what I was thinking too! Aqu-tan, is this real?" Mem-cho excitedly asks.

"....It's really not what you think." Aqua twitches his eye in annoyance before sighing. " The person he's actually been told to meet is...."

.....

" Ruby." With a call of her name, she looks down from her shoes and towards the figure of her little brother.

" Geez, took you long enough!" She pouts, shaking her head in disappointment.

" Why'd you text me to meet you here when I get back? Is something the matter?" He asks.

Ruby doesn't answer. Instead she gestures to the empty seat of the swing set next to her first.

.....

.....

" How was the trip?" Ruby asks.

" Are we seriously going to make small talk?" Beryl responds.

" Yes." She laughs. " I'm not budging on what I wanna really say till' you answer me at least that."

He sighs....

" Well, I guess it was pretty fun--"

" Annnd that's a lie." She interrupts, causing him to immediately glance to her with curiosity.

" Gosh, it's so obvious you lied just now." Her face cringes. " Get better." She rolls her eyes mockingly at his direction.

Beryl's eye twitches. " God, you're irritating as ever."

Ruby giggles before swinging back and forth on her seat in a slow pace. the sunset shines its orange hue and dresses the both of them under its fading light.

"....Throughout that entire trip, you're still just overthinking things in your head, right?" Ruby asks.

"...."

His silence was her answer. She sighs.

" The White Room.....what a horrible place. I'm....so sorry you had to go through something like that." Beryl's eyes widens a bit, hearing the name come out of Ruby's mouth felt unreal, it made him uncomfortable in a sense.

*Was she really going to talk about this now?*

" I'm quite tired, Ruby. I don't think having this talk is going to--"

*" I'm not letting you run away this time."*

And he stops. She eyes him with a look he's rarely seen from her before, she was dead serious on this. " We're going to address this, right here and now."

".....Go ahead then." Beryl quiets down for once.

Her gaze softens.

" Beryl.... I'm not asking you to tell me about your experience there. I want to know, but only if you're comfortable." Her voice

was gentle but firm. " The reason I wanted to talk to you now is because.... I've finally gathered the words I want to say. The word that wants to reach you. Hopefully you'll hear me out."

.....

" Ever since I got to know you, I didn't think we'd get along as well as we did." Ruby smiles, looking off to the distance. " I thought I would hate you with every fiber of my being...."

" You're saying you don't?" Beryl responds, though not in his typical sarcastic fashion. It was more of a warm joke shared between the two of them, but not too loud to disrupt whatever speech she had in mind.

" Heh," Ruby shakes her head. " Well, that is to say, I've come to realize that I don't hate you with *every* fiber of my being." She reiterates.

*So she still hates me somewhat then....* Beryl muses.

" But....with that hate. I also know that I love you just as much." Ruby turns to him. " You know that too, don't you?"

Beryl was suprised. Genuinely. It's been a while....no....it's been years since he's had these words send him off to that familiar feeling from before. *The last person who had done that was none other than....*

*Our mom....*

The feeling of melancholy resides within.

Beryl blinks in a daze, he found himself staring up at her now. When did she stand up in front of him? Before he could ponder on that further, she speaks.

" You don't realize how much I'm worried about you, stupid little



brother." She frowns. " Ever since you widened the distance between us. No matter how hard I tried to close the gap to the way it was. You somehow find a way to shut down my efforts. Why is that? I know it took me a while to accept all the facts myself, to get the courage to get close to you again, but I thought you would be quicker to come to this solution than me." She states.

"....Ruby..."

" I....It hurts, you know?" She crosses her arms. " It hurts being pushed away by you. It's such a prick move to do!"

".....I'm sorry--"

" Sorry won't cut it!" She yells. " Don't you know you can always rely on me, Beryl? Whatever thoughts or feelings you may have, I'm here to listen to all of them. Even if I don't understand. I'll do whatever it takes to make you feel okay. Because you've been doing the same for me this whole time." She steps closer. " You've always stood by my side. You're always encouraging my dream. At least....at least let me shoulder some of the burden for you too."

"....." Beryl couldn't utter a single response to that. He was left truly speechless.

*Well, now that that's out of the way....* Ruby thinks as she regains her composure. All that pent up secret anger she had for the way Beryl's been acting finally released onto her object of frustration. She felt good. But this talk isn't just going to be all about her feelings. Not again.

But before that....

Ruby decides to make things fair between them.

.....

".....Remember when I told you some bits about what my past life was like? " She sighs somberly, her eyes looking down to the dirt beneath her. " How I was a shut-in, who was incapable of doing the

things most people could? I could barely walk. Running was out of the question. I couldn't dance like mama. I couldn't do *anything*."

" I was....bedridden. Just there in bed, only able to watch, not do. Only able to dream, but never achieve." Her tone wavers. " Doesn't that sound pathetic? I was lonely too, there was only ever one person who kept me company but I won't go into that. My point is, is that back then I was at an all time low with myself."

" And then....I was reborn into this new life." She looks at him. " But the fear still carried over. Remember when we first attended kindergarten? I ran away and both you and Aqua went looking for me. And when you found me, I was still stubborn to get out of the hole I dug myself in."

" I wanted both of you to leave me alone. Aqua certainly did..... but you stayed."

"....That was because Aqua told me to." Beryl mumbles, and it takes a pause before he proceeds to add. " But I guess I would've stayed nonetheless."

Ruby laughs. " For some reason, I doubt that...."

" You shouldn't."

.....

" So that's that. That's my pathetic sob story." Ruby smiles painfully. sure, she may have moved on, but the reminder still remains like a scar. A tainted mark to her being. " I don't mean to compare both of our pasts. I just....wanted to tell you this because I don't want to hide any more secrets. I don't want to *lie*."

Her gaze gives out a determined glint. Beryl stares at her, unknowing of what to say or do, but....a single thought occurs....

*Ruby.....you really are....*

*Just like her right now....*

But Beryl knew they weren't the same. While their dear mother may have dazzled in lies as a form of love, his even dearer sister chooses to do the opposite, instead she wants to shine with the truth.

If one were to ask him which would be the better platform to be on. He'll certainly tell you to choose to lie. But....

He admires Ruby's courage to go with the truth, and one day he'd like to replicate that for himself.

" That reminds me..... I never got to thank you for back then." Ruby halts his thoughts.

" Thank me?" Beryl blinks.

She nods. " You helped me become the person I am, after all. If it weren't for you, I would've never gotten to give dancing a proper shot."

*What is she talking about?*

" It was our mom who helped you. I didn't do much of anything." He responded, confused.

" You did, Beryl. You certainly did." she chuckles. " Shall I word it out for you?"

.....

" Back then, you told me; ' This is a chance for you, for me, to do the things we couldn't do then'. You told me that this was a new life. A new beginning." She starts. " And the fact I felt you could understand my problems, just made it all the more believable to me. To hear it from a person with the gaze I once had before..... it gave me courage."

" It made me choose not to waste the life we've been given now." She smiles. " And I'm grateful for making that choice every single day."

She pats his head, combing her fingers through his long mane of blonde hair, he flinches in surprise but does not move a single inch from where he sat. He simply stares at her while she continues to say,

" Mama may have given me the courage to try again no matter how many times I fall. To get back up no matter how many times I hit the ground. And I will forever remember her words, and cherish them."

*Of course you will, Beryl agrees.*

" But it was because of your words back then, Beryl, that I even had the courage to try at all."

How many more times will she surprise him like this?

But.... this is when he truly realized just how much he impacted a person like Ruby. Beryl never believed he was a good person according to the current society's views on what good and bad is. But to think someone like him could've helped Ruby sprout into the person she is today. It....was a strange feeling, but not one he dislikes.

And the same could be said vice-versa right now. She doesn't know how much her company in his time of need impacted his soul.

.....

" You helped me realize the freedom I have to make choices."

Beryl's eyes zero in on her at that.

*Freedom?*

Hearing that word only reminded Beryl of his own confusion. It was a word that constantly appeared in his mind, a word that constantly reminded him of what he lacked even today-- a word that haunts him in his deep recesses.

" These days.... I have a feeling that.... just like how I was stuck on my past life on my inability to do the stuff I wanted to do. That's what you're currently feeling now too, is it?" She asked.

"....Somewhat." He finally tells her, honestly. " Yeah, you're somewhat right."

Ruby thought that was all he was going to say, but suprisingly, he continues.

" To be honest.... I really didn't feel anything for the White Room. From then, even to now. I still feel nothing of it. Neither fear nor reminiscence. But..." Beryl closes his eyes. " Ever since I was reborn into this life. I finally thought I could break free from the chains of the past that held me before. And so for the most part, I kept running till I hit a dead end. It's not working out."

He sighs.

" And I'm confused with who I am. The collision of my past to this present, is messing up my head." Beryl clenches his fist. " It makes me wonder if the freedom I have now is but a temporary illusion I fooled myself into thinking. What if, someday, the past will really come to snatch me back. What then? What will happen to me? Will I go back to the person I was? I don't want that. Ever. "

" I want nothing more than to erase a chance like that. I want nothing more than to keep running.....but I can't. Even when the White Room is gone, a part of me is still there. Standing alone."

" And I get paranoid thinking of it every single day. I don't think....I have the same freedom to choose like you do."

.....

" You're wrong." Ruby says.

He opens his eyes and was met with her piercing gaze.

" You do have the freedom to choose. You're just.....going about it the wrong way, dummy." She laughs. " Running away isn't going to solve the problem. So why not accept it?"

She holds two fingers up. " I realized this just recently, but no matter what we do, you're still **Kiyotaka** and **Beryl** at the same time, no?"

" We can't do with ignoring the past for too long." Ruby shakes her head. " It only makes us anxious."

" You're letting your past control how you see your freedom. It's so dumb!" Ruby pouts. " To me, you're not just Kiyotaka of the White Room. Not some masterpiece or whatever cringe nickname they gave you. No. None of that mattered to me. I'm choosing to see you as just Beryl. My little brother, Beryl."

" And it's your choice too. To see yourself as just that, while accepting who you were. There's nothing wrong with that. You're just complicating it..."

" After all...."

*" Is Freedom anything but the right to live as we wish? "*

*'Nothing else...'*

" Live how you want to, Beryl. Just like you taught me to give

things a shot, I'm returning the favor to you now." Ruby gives him a bright smile that rivalled the sunset. " Besides, didn't you prefer calling yourself Goldenberyl from now on? "

" It was the name that Mama gave you after all!"

*Really now...*

.....

A long silence.

The birds chirping back to their homes.

The sounds of the ambience.

Golden brown eyes soften at the image of her.

A small smile appears forth.

" Yeah..... I guess you're right." He gets up from his seat, his tall height hovering over hers a good feet taller. " And I don't really like to admit saying you're right.....but you are."

*The meaning of freedom, huh....*

*Freedom is the choice to live as we wish...*

*In spite of your past. You choose to live on in the present.*

*I should too. I should accept the chains that binded me from then, and enjoy this life despite it.*

*As both Kiyotaka....and myself.*

Beryl pulls her in for a hug.

" Eh--!" Ruby's face was smashed right against Beryl's chest. It hurt a little, and so she was ready to complain but...

" Thank you, Ruby....." He murmurs. " It looks like you saved me again..."

The words go back down her throat as she smiles against his chest and decides to sigh in relief, feeling the tension built up over the past month crumbling down. She imagines the distance between them had just closed in this symbolic hug.

She hugs him too, patting his back.

" You're not alone Beryl. None of us are. As long as we got each other..... we'll help each other, no?"

That's what siblings are for.

~~~~~

Beryl felt truly free. The weight on his shoulders have finally lifted, and the deep pit in his stomach has disappeared. There was no void. He wasn't empty.

He used to be, but not anymore.

" You owe me pudding." Ruby says with her tongue poking out teasingly.

" Sure, whatever." Beryl rolls his eyes as they walked side by side

to the direction of the convenience store.

His past as Kiyotaka remains the same. It'll forever be there. It's part of him, it always has been. But now.... he's willing to accept it into this life too.

The life he lives as Beryl. The youngest out of the triplets. A son of a mother he holds dear.

He should've done so from the start, but he guesses he'd been too stubborn in his previous beliefs to consider it.

" So are you going to Frill's party a month from now?" Ruby asks.

" Eh.... still thinking about it." Beryl shrugs.

" Ehhh~? C'mon! It'll be fun! " Ruby encourages him.

His past won't change who he is today. Perhaps the lesson here was that his past serves as a means for him to understand the true value of his present.

The importance of holding dear to those he cherishes...

As the pair closed the distance to the convenience store, a figure was approaching them. Assumingly, to walk pass. Ruby continues to chatter and pester, while Beryl listens and rebukes as usual.

The distance between them and the figure is closing.

He is no longer just Kiyotaka , a monster who knew only victory.

He is also Beryl, a boy who's known loss.

Beryl observes that the figure was wearing a dark hoodie and a

black facemask. Something was off.

A boy who lost his mother....

They got nearer.

But that loss only fuels his eagerness to protect what he has now.

Those memories...

" God...I'm so happy right now...!"

" You're going a bit overboard, Ruby."

" Shush, Aqua! Mama is performing!"

" She's crazy.....don't you agree too, Beryl? "

"...."

It plays in his head..... those times of pure bliss...

" Hehe, so you see kids, this glitter must be applied just sparingly by the corner of your eyes to give them that sparkle in your eyes! "

" You're amazing, Ai..."

" Oh-oh! I wanna try! Mama, can I please try? "

" Hehe~! Of course, dear! I'll put some on you too, Beryl. I feel like you'd look super duper pretty with a bit of this too~!"

"...."

.....

" Aww, you three look so cute! Super duper cute! "

" You look infinity times cuter, Mama!"

" What's with this rivalry..." Aqua mutters, before turning to the boy next to him. " How are you feeling about all this, Beryl?"

".....I...."

He had gained everything he has ever wanted...

Ever dreamed of...

But....the loss had happened too...

.....

" I'm sorry..... I hoped that my lies would turn out to be truth. I believed it to be my way of showing love..... and...."

" I wish....I'd told you this sooner. I love you. All three of you. My three precious treasures--!"

" A-Ai...."

" M-Mama....no....!"

".....Mom, please...."

.....

With that loss, it solidified everything for him.

To protect what he has now, with his every last breath.

He has no plans of losing more than he has to.

The hooded person passes by, without a single glance, without a single word. Ruby points out that the store was really close now, and was wondering to herself what type of flavors she would pick today, while Beryl only sighed.

.....

" Come on, we're gonna be late."

" Hurry up, Ruby."

" Geez, you two! I'm almost done, just a minute more!"

.....

" We're off."

He'll protect them both. His two treasures.

.....

Swish! A kick was launched towards his sister.

Beryl's eyes narrow and he was quick to respond, pulling Ruby aside to safer distance, while blocking the shot with his right arm.

Thump! It lands, and then quickly retracts.

The figure with golden eyes stare at him with amusement.

" H-Huh? Beryl?"

" Ruby...are you okay?"

Ruby blinked in confusion, but upon realizing what's happened, she felt nervous. Did this....person just try to attack them? She tries to turn to Bery for answers, but her little brother simply glared at the person with a familiar cold air around him.

" Who the hell are you." He bluntly interrogates, tugging Ruby to his back side, to keep her from being in the front.

" Hehe.....wow.... now this I didn't expect." The figure turns out to be a woman's voice, much to Beryl and Ruby's surprise. " I thought you two would be as easy as swatting a fly....but to think you responded that quick. Hm. Maybe there's a lot more to you than I initially thought."

Beryl narrows his eyes at her. *Her aura.....it's just like that man at the store....*

" Oh, why don't we play? You seem a lot more interesting now!" She laughed, almost psychotically. " Oh but first, I should introduce myself to my new temporary playmate! Hehe, my bad."

She takes off her hood, revealing her magenta red coloured hair. She also took off her mask, revealing her unnerving grin accompanying her almost cute face. Her golden eyes gazes like a predator.

" My name is **Amasawa Ichika**, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance~"

Beryl stares her down silently.

*To think he'd encounter another **White Room** student....*

" B-Beryl--"

" Ruby, stay behind me and don't move unless I tell you to."

At the worst timing possible...

.....

~~~ Chapter End~~~

**FINALLY THAT 50% IS DONEEEEEEE**

Once again the chapter reached a word count of 17k. Exactly 50% of what I wanted to put in the last chapter too but hey, it is what it is!

But....again, I may have tweaked my ideas a bit.

I think it's obvious where this is gonna go right? Finally, a real showdown between a White Room alumni....and an estranged ( ? ) White Room student. Except that Beryl is considerably a lot weaker than his prime..... or is he :)

I planned to put the fight here but I feel it once again kinda messes with the pace, so I'm saving it for the next chapter.

Lemme just say that the next chapter won't be too long. It might even be just 5k words. And idk when i wanna start on it cuz im about to do some assignments too so.....yeah...

But I'll do my best to cook. Once you start a hype, you gotta do ur best to live up to it. So I'll be sure to give you a satisfying short battle between the two. Im actually pretty excited. We're

**finally getting into the scenes I've been DYING to write since this oneshot series bloomed into its own fanfic.**

**I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and look forward to more!  
And a belated merry christmas to those who celebrate it like I do!**

**Question of the Chapter: Who will win a short fight between the two, Beryl or Ichika?**

**See you in the next chapter~**

**Next Chapter: A clash between students.**

## 13. A Clash between Students

"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear."

– Ambrose Redmoon

~~~~~

Seconds felt like minutes, and minutes felt like hours, as he stares at the White Room student that went by **Amasawa Ichika**.

Again, hers was a face he didn't recognize to be a part of the Fourth Generation's batch of students. Nor did her name ring a familiar tune to him. And yet still, just like that man from the store, she exuded that same aura.

Beryl was clenching and unclenching his fists, his feet subtly shifting into a better stance just in case she attacks but....

This is an extremely dangerous situation, he thinks.

No cameras were around, nor were there passer-bys that could spot the scene and call for help. Nothing. It was as if this entire interaction was set up from the start, but Beryl was confident to believe that that isn't the case. This interaction was but a mere coincidence. An unfortunate one, much to their chagrin. The woman in front of him was simply staring at him with amusement all over, she seemed to be studying his every move, as expected from a White Room student but....

Ruby is here... This was the main problem. He needs to get her out

of here. She mustn't get hurt.

" *Ruby...*" He whispers, without looking at her. The distance between them and that woman was good enough so that she wouldn't pick up on his plans. However, there is the chance that she could still interpret what he was going to say due to the sheer scale of the White Room training-- but none of that mattered to him at this point. He needed to get his sister out of here.

Ruby turns to him, not saying a word, but Beryl knew she was listening.

" *When I say run.....you run as fast you can. And don't look back, okay?*"

Ruby was about to retort until--

" *We'll run together, just promise me that when you run, don't you dare look back. This isn't a game. Please. Trust me.*"

.....

Desperation was laced in his tone this time to really engrave it to Ruby's head that he was serious, and that there was no room for argument. Ruby looked disappointed, but mostly worried. Still, she nodded. She trusts him. How could she not? This is her brother....

The last time she heard him use that tone of voice.....was from back then....

No, no time to think about that now. She needed to get ready. She knew well enough that Beryl wouldn't run after her. He would most likely stay to try and distract this woman, to stall for Ruby to leave and find help. That was the plan, she thinks. Besides, she had full faith that Beryl might even just beat this woman! He is strong. She recalls several instances in the past where Beryl had gotten into fights and came out unscathed, even managed to win a 10 v 1 against their middle school's ' delinquent ' group with his bare hands alone....

Ruby releases a breath. *He'll be fine. He'll win*, she believes that fully.

.....

I'm sorry, Ruby. Beryl apologizes to her in his mind. Things aren't definite yet, but he knew that the odds were against his favour this time around. It's not likely he could beat this woman in a straight fight. But as long as Ruby escaped, then he will have win the gamble.

" Planning to run away, are we? " The woman-- Amasawa --spoke, her widening grin indicates that she knew exactly what they were planning. " Let's see how *that* goes then~" She sung, wickedly.

Ruby flinches hearing the tone of her voice. She could sense the malicious intent behind it, and terrible scenarios began making its way to her head..... but she dismisses all of them. She *has* to watch for Beryl's signal.

Beryl begins the count, keeping his eyes on the woman, watching her every miniscule move.

Three.....

He hopes that Ruby's idol training will have paid off. He knows she has built stamina over the last few weeks with her daily jogs....

Two....

Make it home, Ruby. That is all your brother asks of you. Don't worry about him.

One....

No matter what, stay alive.

.....

With the subtle flick of his wrist, Ruby immediately began to act. She spun around, digging her heel to the ground, as she was ready to run like her life depended on it within that fraction of a second.

But so was Amasawa.

Beryl's eyes widened, his breath hitches, as he yells out.

" Ruby, don't move! "

" H-Huh?" Ruby froze immediately. She spun around again to face him with her evident confusion, but all she was met with was the uncomfortable expression Beryl was wearing on his face. It left her feeling unease.

What happened? Why did you change your mind? She wanted to ask, but the tension in the area was far too thick for her to cut.

.....

Damn it... Beryl knew even this plan had the slim chance of success. But the sheer reaction time of Amasawa, who was ready to bolt as soon as Ruby processed his signal, forced a redirection.

" Oh, make up your mind~ Are you gonna run or not?!" Amasawa laughs mockingly, as Beryl gritted his teeth, slightly perturbed of the situation at hand. A White Room student could easily catch up to the ordinary person....

It was a fact they *both* knew.

Beryl considers perhaps catching the woman off guard, and lifting

Ruby over his shoulder, before sprinting his fastest speed. Certainly, his body now compared to before, has a better athletic attribute but.... his instincts are screaming at him not to make that decision. He tries to rationalize the reason as to why, but the only conclusion he could arrive to was that Amasawa Ichika remains as the unknown factor in this equation.

She has the likeness of a Fourth Generation student..... but with an added twist to it. He can't identify what that might be. But he'd rather not test it now. She seemed to be having her fill of wicked entertainment by gazing at the siblings as if they were helpless prey-- which in this case, they are.

If I run with Ruby in my arms.....and if she catches up to me..... I won't be able to dodge an upcoming attack, Beryl figures that to be the only reason why. There does exist the chance of Amasawa not being able to catch up due to the sheer physical advantage Beryl has over her, and the fact he'd taken running and stamina endurance training seriously for a decade now.... it's not impossible for Beryl to successfully escape with Ruby in tow.

But the fact remains; This is a woman who has endured White Room training far longer than he has. He doesn't know the exact details as to how the other generations must've been taught their curriculum in comparison to his. But the fact this woman could give the vibe of the latter, speaks enough that the training must've been of similar intensity. Knowing this, running can't be an option, especially with how he observed her insane reaction time.....

" Okay, I'm done waiting." Amasawa chuckles before slowly approaching them, Beryl's eyes widened and he instinctively shields Ruby. " Let's play now~"

" B-Beryl...." Ruby's tone was scared, each step the woman made towards them, made her tremble in fear. *Just who is she?* Could she be part of that facility?

Hearing Ruby's voice snapped Beryl out of his instincts for a moment. She was scared. He could tell that much. But...

He could tell further, *that Ruby must be feeling death itself lurking in on her at this very moment.*

No. He can't have that. Damn it, Beryl, think!

" Why did you attack us?" He finally asked her, causing Amasawa to pause in her steps.

" Why? Well, that's for my reasons to know, and yours to never figure out!" She winks. " No hard feelings though, kiddo~ Think of this event as simply a matter of bad luck. But hey! You seemed quite a bit out of the ordinary when you blocked my kick just then, so now I'm curious to see if that was just a fluke..." Then her eyes narrow. " Or if you can do more."

" So let's play!" She laughs again in amusement.

She's mental, Beryl surmises. Reasoning with her does not present itself as an option.

" Then....in that case..."

Still, he has to try.

" At least let my sister go." Beryl throws one final shot. " I'll fight you as you wish. But you'll have to let her go. "

Amasawa raises a brow at that.

" B-Beryl!" Ruby breaks her silence, immediately clutching onto his arm and shaking it violently. " Y-You can't just stay here! " Even if she initially believed he's strong enough to beat her, something about this woman feels off now. Something about this is risky. And Ruby doesn't want to see that risk!

" Come with me....come on..." Ruby tries to pull him, but he stays motionless, staring down the woman before them. " Come on, we can run....you're fast, right? J-Just carry me, and then we'll run to

the nearest station--"

" Ruby..."

" T-This woman is dangerous, Beryl. I'm telling you! No, I'm sure you figured that out too so--"

" Ruby."

" You have to listen to me! We have to run away from *this*.... y-you're just going to get hurt and--"

" Stop being a stubborn girl for once and listen to me. "

Her grip on his arm slackens upon hearing him speak in a tone she wasn't used to hearing from him. It was rough, coarse, and it screams he's doing everything he can not to do more. But when he finally looks at her, only to be met with a harsh glare, she freezes even more.

" There's no other choice." He shakes her hand off of him. " Don't make this more difficult than it is."

No.... Ruby's lips closes to a thin line as tears threatened to leave her, and with brows furrowed, she opens her mouth to retort despite the threat.

" We talked about this..... we always have a choice--"

He looks away from her again.

" And my choice is to save you."

She goes silent at that. Once again, it feels like the distance between them has grown wider. Except.... to a scale Ruby never wished to even have think of. If she lets him go through this, then she might never be able to see him again. She wanted to yell at him, scream at him for being stupid-- that there's better ways. But what can she do to prove that? They were lucky enough as is that

this woman didn't just kill them both on sight just yet. She was watching, and she looked oh so amused at this display.

" I'm making this deal to save you," He repeats. " You still have a dream to upkeep, don't you? Focus on that. Don't worry about me." He muttered.

" *Beryl....please....*" Her response, although pleading, she already sounded defeated. She can't do anything to veto his decision at the moment.

Beryl tunes Ruby out. Not willing to hear any more of her voice, putting his full focus on Amasawa alone.

" Do we have a deal, Amasawa? " He finally asked for her response.

Amasawa hums for a moment, roleplaying a thinking expression, but Beryl knew this was only her way of mocking them both. He found it irritating, but he didn't show it. It didn't matter if Amasawa was annoying or not right now, what matters is that she accepts his offer--

" No." She cuts through like a merciless blade.

Beryl goes silent, his fist immediately clenching at her response.

" What?" She tilts her head, " Did you seriously think I'd accept? What, did you seriously think you're in some sort of place to negotiate with me~? "

Damn it....Damn it....Damn it...!

" As touching as your relationship with each other is, what with all the protection and care you seem to have for the other. I unfortunately cannot sympathize." She grins.

Beryl tries to remain calm despite the severity of their situation,

he continues to try to think of a plan. There has to be something. *Please* let there be something....

" I'm not letting either of you go." She says, clapping her hands together rather joyfully. " However! Since you seem to love making deals, how about I propose one right now that could satiate both of our interests?"

" It's a simple deal, really." She snaps her fingers, and then pointing to Beryl. " if you can beat me in a fight, the two of you can go home alive. However..." She points to herself. " If I beat *you* in this fight. The both of you die. "

" And if she decides to run during our little bout..." Lastly, she points and smirks at Ruby. The blonde flinches again, as an evil glint shined in Amasawa's gaze. " I'll kill her first."

"....." Both Beryl and Ruby didn't utter a word. The former is doing his best not to show a single reaction at the moment, trying to keep the waves in his mind calm. While the latter was shaking in place from fear, she wondered..... *if she really was going to die today.*

" So? Do we have a deal?" Amasawa chipperly asks. It intimidated Ruby to no end just how nonchalant this woman is about taking another person's life. She *must* be deranged.

Meanwhile,

Beryl wondered why this had to happen *today*. Of all the other days. Why did he have to encounter this entity, with Ruby just behind him? If he tries to go back to the previous plan and act as a distraction for Ruby to make her escape, Amasawa would simply ignore him and chase after his sister like a wolf hunting a bunny rabbit. Conversely, if he tries to force his earlier deal, Amasawa might just switch triggers and attack them both immediately. This entire situation is inconvenient simply because he knows nothing of Amasawa's abilities, she was a greatly inconvenient unknown factor in this mess, and he knew there was only one way to find an answer; And that was to confront her head on.

But without the guarantee of Ruby's safety....

.....

He has no other choice.

" I accept."

As soon as Beryl uttered those words, Ruby stares at him with uncertainty. While Amasawa hums happily to his answer.

" Attaboy~ " Amasawa cooes before warming up her muscles again. Cracking her joints, and performing a few basic stretches, especially for her legs. " This is going to be fun! Please don't disappoint me.... Beryl, was it? An interesting name, hehe!"

Ruby tries to reach for Beryl again, hoping to make him reconsider, but one look from Beryl stopped her from doing anything else. *Stay put*, his gaze said. After that, he returns his attention back to Amasawa. Ruby bit her lip, gripping the ends of her skirt tightly, as anxiety began to pile up inside her. Is she going to just stand here and watch? That certainly seems to be the case and she *hates* it.

She's useless here and she knows it.

The only thing she can do..... is hope.

Hope that he would win.

Hope that somebody would come and save them....

.....

" Ready?" Amasawa grins.

Now or never.

" Ready--"

But he was quickly interrupted by Amasawa directly charging at him with a manic expression. She threw her first kick, which he reacted to just fine with a block, and then another from her other leg after she retracted the first, and that was blocked too.

Amasawa's attacks were relentless. The way she moved was sporadic, and risky, yet she still put a ton of power behind her kicks and punches. Her kicks were especially dangerous, since they aimed for his head and lower body constantly to try and set him off balance, to give way for an opportunity for her to perform a takedown or submission hold. But Beryl could react just barely fast enough to read her movements as accurate as he can.

" Don't just defend," Amasawa says before throwing a punch to his abdomen. " Attack too!" but Beryl was quick to maneuver to the side, thereby dodging the punch.

She seems to be fond of using capoeira and taekwondo, her kicks are dangerous, I need to be careful, Beryl studied her movements throughout the first minute and processed it before having to defend himself from another flurry of kicks from Amasawa. He finds it unbelievable how risque her movements were, she seemed to have no care of how much space she was leaving open for her opponent to attack. But then again, it works. Due to the reason that she was fast and agile enough to force him into a corner. Even if he tries to switch from defense to offense, it wouldn't be that simple, it's all about timing and if he messes that up it'd risk a good blow to his own body. Potentially ending the fight. And then leaving Ruby all alone...

Ruby watched in worry as she saw Beryl was being pushed back

constantly, all the while being taunted by Amasawa. She didn't know much about fighting, but she could tell just fine if a person was winning or losing. And much to her heart's discontent, Beryl is slowly becoming the latter. There was just no opportunity for him to attack! Amasawa's energy and stamina was evident, her kicks haven't gotten weaker nor slower by the second minute.

Keep your mind calm and analyze, Beryl reminds himself. As he dodged and parried, he was simultaneously looking for a pattern he could intercept to get a good punch in. He had the physical advantage over Amasawa here, his reach was longer, and his power would certainly deal a great amount of damage if he actually hits her. All he needs is to find a timing.....

Bam! Suddenly, one of Amasawa's punches connected to his cheekbone.

" B-Beryl!" Ruby yelled after him as the boy was suddenly dazed. Amasawa then performs a powerful front kick to his chest, knocking the wind out of him, and sending him back a few meters away.

Beryl staggers back a few meters, before his knees gave up and crumpled on the ground. He places a hand on his chest, trying to catch his breath.

" *Haah....haah.....hagh....!*" It was difficult. Since when was the last time anyone had landed such a blow on him? Even back in the White Room, there weren't many occurrences of that ever happening, as he simply grew and grew to overwhelm all of his obstacles.

But now....

" If defending is all you're good at, then I'm a bit disappointed." Amasawa puts a hand to her hip, cocking her head to the side. " Though, I do have to give you some credit. You defended extremely well. Moreso, than I thought you would."

" Hrrk....! " Beryl needs to get his shit together. *Get up. Get up. Get*

up.

His arms were sore. They were twitching involuntarily. Damn it. He tried to ignore it before, but his body needed to be heeded this time.... blocking Amasawa's punches, and especially her kicks, is not the most optimal defense he should do. They were strong. Too strong, in fact. It was only a matter of time till his defense would've slackened..... which is probably how she managed to get a punch to connect in the first place. His endurance....isn't enough.

" Aww, don't tell me this is your limit? " Amasawa pouts in disappointment. " C'mon, playmate. Get up! Isn't it embarrassing to lose like this in front of your *sister*? "

Ruby.... His golden brown eyes turn to his sister. And all he sees is a tearful expression. He cringes from it, he didn't want her to cry. God he must look pathetic right now. Ah, if he does get them both out of this mess, she would probably use this as a chance to tease him again. Yes.... that's what his brat sister would do for sure.

Honestly.... he wouldn't mind that.

But first, he has to get up. No matter what.

He *has* to.

Amasawa's smile brightens.

" That's it.... get up, kid." She giggles. " Don't cut our fun short now~"

After catching his breath, Beryl gets up. His breathing was still somewhat ragged, but it should be bearable. He just needs to maintain his composure. Don't overthink, but at the same time, don't think less. He needs to win this, but beating her isn't an

option. Knocking her out would've been preferred initially, but after further observations, he doubts it would give them enough time.

So the only option there is....

Beryl speeds up towards her.

*Is to fight her with the intention to **kill her**.*

.....

This time it was Amasawa's turn to be on the defensive, she grins happily to each dodge and parry she performs against the kid's attacks. She found it absolutely interesting how this guy could keep up with her like this, it was certainly *unnatural*, and she wants to find out why that is.

The look on your face has changed... Amasawa notes the shift in his gaze. He is trying to kill her? Good. That's exactly what she was looking for from him.

.....

Beryl has that expression again, Ruby's breaths felt shallow as she recognized that expression from *that day*.

When that bastard stalker took their mother away, and Beryl unleashed absolute hell as he repeatedly battered the man's face till he was unrecognizable from his card. She remembers, feeling horrified, as she watched anger and hatred take over his usually calm nature. And now.... he wants to do the same to this woman.

And she knew, painfully so, that he's doing it for her sake.

.....

Minute three....

Amasawa tries to kick, but Beryl quickly counters using his elbow to hit block against and hit her at her laterals. Amasawa's eyes widened a bit in suprise for once, before a clear smile takes space once more, she absolutely loved this--

Thud! Before she could finish the thought, Beryl used that near once in a lifetime opportunity to flip her, catch her off-guard, and slam her against the pavement. He was quick to act as he immediately tried to follow up with a ground rear naked choke, he should've found no problem in outwrestling her, but to his suprise, Amasawa caught on to his plans much quicker than he anticipated. She slammed her head against his nose.

" Agh!" *Damn it, so close--*

She kicks him off of her again, making him fall to his back. She quickly rolls back into standing position and rushes with a gleeful smile as she aimed a sharp kick at his jaw, to which Beryl didn't allow himself to receive its full maximum damage as he twisted his head according to the kick to reduce the damage received.

Amasawa notices this and hums in approval, deciding to pause for a moment in place. She watches Beryl slowly get up and staggering backwards, tears welled up at the corner of his eyes as the immediate result of his nose receiving a hard headbutt. Blood seeps its way out of there too, but the boy didn't seem to care one bit. Already putting his hands up and eyeing her for her next move.

Minute four....

.....

Landing a hit on her face is near impossible with her agility compared to mine... Beryl grits his teeth as a means to try to help shoulder his breathing. Now he has to breathe through his mouth. Fantastic.

She seems to have stopped. Why is she just eyeing him? No, this is good. He could use this to try and think of a plan--

" You know what I am, don't you?"

Huh?

" I've noticed the way you've looked at me since this whole thing began. I could sense your tension." Amasawa narrows her eyes. " You realized that I'm from the **White Room** this entire time, haven't you?"

" I.... suspected it, is all." Beryl speaks hoarsely. " You're....not normal. You match the description of what the news gave you people...." He feigns how little knowledge he has of the White Room. He'd rather not give away any more ' interest ' for her to make of than she does now.

" Hm, " She tilts her head, curiously thinking. " For some reason I can't seem to believe that." She says. " Your eyes give away more than just *that* little knowledge. Like you know exactly how much of a danger I pose, and how I move from the get-go."

A hum.

" Tell me, are you a student too?" She asks him.

He doesn't answer. He focuses on trying to numb himself of the pain. Get his body ready for the next exchange of blows, hopefully, this time not one-sided.

" No, I take it back. I don't recognize your face at all. Which makes you even more....out of the ordinary." She smirks. " You fight

like an expert. Who would've thought I'd find such a capable fighter out of two strangers I thought I'd kill easily."

So it really is coincidence we met... Beryl notes that. She doesn't seem to be sent by anyone to harm him or Ruby specifically, she has a different intention in mind. She would've done this to any other person she could've met besides them. It's just that this time they weren't under the guidance of lady luck, and thus they crossed paths.

" Hey there!" Amasawa calls out to Ruby. " Your brother fights nicely! You're quite lucky to be his sister. I bet he fights off all the guys that try to get their slimy hands on you, eh~? "

Ruby flinches back. How many times has she flinched already? She couldn't help it. This woman screamed danger, Ruby was *afraid*.

But even more so afraid....

That Beryl would die here....

" Please.....stop it..." She muttered, but nobody could hear her. She watched, utterly helpless, as Amasawa began approaching her brother with slow steps.

She wants to yell, she wants to cry, *she wants to run to him--!*

But....

' Ruby, stay behind me and don't move unless I tell you to. '

' Ruby, there's no other choice. '

' Stop being a stubborn girl for once and listen to me.'

She bites her lip again, till it bled. With clenched fists, she shuts her eyes and looks to the ground. Swallowing the bitter truth that doing something stupid would only distract him. This was the only she can do.

' Stay put.'

.....

" Is this really all you can do?" Amasawa stands before him, her eyes looking down on him as if he were a bug that fascinated her. " Remember our deal. If you lose....the both of you die."

Beryl hasn't forgotten that.

How could he?

" I applaud you for taking the steps necessary to try and kill me. I was quite satisfied seeing that murderous cold expression you wore as we fought. Though you could only disable me temporarily from my leg and throw me down on the ground..... which didn't do much, but hey! A+ for effort, right~?" She shrugs.

He was close....

So damn close...

" You could barely keep up, but you're at least tons better than any other random stranger I would've killed on the street. So I'm quite glad we met!" She chirps, before a malicious smile adorns her lips again. " Unfortunately, it seems to me you've reached your limit. That's a shame."

The old him had no limit...

" Well..... you know what? Since you entertained me for a few minutes. I might as well give you some wisdom! Not like it'll do much since I plan to kill you and your sister, but it's the thought that counts." She laughs before crouching down to his level, maintaining full eye contact with him.

" One thing us experiments were taught back in that place. Was this mindset..... ' in this world, winning is everything '." She whispered.

Beryl's eyes widened upon hearing that line again.

" Bet the news didn't tell you that, huh? Well, they wouldn't have understood its meaning as well as we did but..... winning really meant everything to myself and my colleagues." She smiles. " To win meant to survive. And to survive meant to keep winning at all costs. Even if it means having to kill to do so. The methods didn't really matter..."

" *Where am I going with this? Ah well, I suppose..... if you really cared about your sister. You would've tried to beat me even if your body broke down, no?"*

Winning is everything....

The methods don't matter. Nor what sacrifices needed to be done.

As long as you win in the end, nothing else should matter.

.....Funny how he used to believe those words like a stupid mantra back then. But he couldn't deny its partly what kept him going, as it had its points that made sense to him. Even now, it continues to influence some of his actions.

But....

So many things matter besides winning.

This is what he learned after facing loss.

Family....friends....hangouts....food....drinks....

All of that **matters**.

Perhaps it's just not something a white room student could understand unless they went through the same realizations he did. But he couldn't care about what a White Room student would think, or how they would judge him if he'd realized such things sooner.

But right now, what mattered to him, above all else, was his sister.

Her smile, her joy, her anger, her sadness, her dreams, her ambitions-- her life.

If he loses here, she would lose all of that.

And if he loses....

He'll lose **her** all over again.

.....

Get up and fight. Grit your teeth if you have to. Adapt at all costs.

is this not what you're used to?

The woman before you is nothing but an obstacle. Destroy it at all costs, and achieve your goal.

Don't break your promises, Beryl. Don't ever do so.

She may not know it now, but you too were once a student.

In fact, you were the best that'd ever been.

.....

..... I don't care much about being the best, nor being the strongest anymore. It's a meaningless title.

I don't care much about winning and reaching the top and gaining an advantage over others.

I choose to not care about those things, and instead let my priorities lie elsewhere. As a son. As a brother. As....the new life that'd been given to me. I am both blessed and cursed, but I'll choose to live with that.

However.... if you think this is really it for me. That's fine.

But know this, Amasawa.

Never, not even in a million other universes, would I ever let you lay a hand on my family.

" Oh...? You're getting up?" Amasawa watched in surprise as beryl

calmly got up, his hands that were previously rested on his chest, now falling off to the side

She smiles in anticipation.

I'll protect her. I'll protect my brother too.

I won't let my own incompetence act as my executioner today. Not when I still have a promise to keep to the both of you.

Even if my chances of winning are unlikely, I'll continue to stand my ground.

Even if it means....

Having to prove once more....

That in the world of the White Room....

There is none that can beat me.

.....

"Beryl...?" Ruby blinks in confusion at what she's seeing. It was if her brother had changed to an entirely different person within a minute. Any murderous intent, or feelings of anger, just....dissipated?

What surprised her even more was when he finally met her eyes at last. He signals something with her hand.....was he reassuring her? How cocky.

Cocky, huh....

Even so....

Ruby can't help but smile in relief this time.

Her little brother is back.

.....

" Oh? You look lively now--"

Before Amasawa could finish mocking him a second time, her eyes widened in surprise when she just *barely* dodged a heavy kick from her tall opponent.

When did you--?

Again, interrupted by his attack, she could barely even finish her thoughts. As Beryl threw several combos of punches and kicks, Amasawa responds in kind by countering each with a parry or follow-up attack-- however, she noticed something was quite different this time around. Each attack she threw back was being effortlessly dodged by the boy as if he saw it coming beforehand. As if he knew her moves before she could even think of it herself.

Strange.... something's changed with you. Amasawa thought suspiciously. His entire demeanor from earlier when he was practically being beaten to humiliation was just gone. As if it were never there. Was everything till now but an act?

it's been a while.....hasn't it? Beryl thought. *It's like I don't even see you anymore, Amasawa.*

All he saw was just another opponent he had to beat in a room with only white. He's back there again. With something to prove.

With a reason to win, and not just for the sake of winning.

Thump! Amasawa grins when she felt her front kick connect against him once more. But then an uncomfortable feeling began to form within that split second as Beryl didn't seem to react anymore. His eyes were focused on her. Without emotion. Just desire.

To win.

Bam!

"Thuagh!" Amasawa coughs when she felt a fist ram through her solar plexus.

The both of them stagger back from each other's critical blows, with Beryl clutching his chest once more, but his eyes remained focus on Amasawa as she seemed to receive the pain a lot more than he did. She was coughing repeatedly and clutching her center with genuine shock on her expression for once.

No time to relax.

Beryl winds his fist again.

No time to breathe.

Amasawa looks up at him and begins to react.

No time to even blink!

Thump! His punch was a feint, meant to disguise a full powered semi-roundhouse kick aimed towards her side where the liver resided.

Amasawa gets knocked down to the ground, clutching her side with her free hand, seemingly struggling to catch her breath as blood began to drip from her mouth. Her expression no longer what it used to be. The cocky and mocking arrogance has all but vanished as she faced him seriously.

There's no mistaking it.....this kid.....could read me. Amasawa concludes, a bitter laugh tempting to escape her.

Guess she'll have to try a little harder. She smiles again, and their battle resumes.

Minute 8....

.....

Ruby watched in amazement as her brother fought Amasawa with concentration and intent to win at all costs. She wondered what may have motivated him to become a new person in the span of minutes! She's never seen him fought this purposely before, all the guys she's seen him beat up in the past were done in very lackluster fashion compared to what he's doing now. Each hit made her cringe as if she could feel the pain Amasawa must be enduring too.

Speaking of which,

That woman...is just as crazy... Ruby stood there in sheer disbelief watching Amasawa dish out the same energy without fail. It's as if she wasn't even tired! No matter how much the both of them staggered from each other's exchange of blows, they still push forth

as if it didn't even affect them.

Still....

She's relieved. Beryl is finally fighting back with *everything*.

He might just be able to steal the win....

Or so she hopes.

.....

Taking all those blows from earlier helped readjust my body to the pain received from a White Room student. Beryl thinks. With that feeling ingrained into him once more, his body has taken a step closer to becoming what it once was. Though the gap difference is still obvious..... he can at least hold his own against Amasawa.

Amasawa prefers kicks over punches, her movements may seem sporadic, but if you observe just enough. You could find there is a pattern.

Life is not without its patterns. She is no exception.

All I have to do is to expose those patterns as much as I can and hit her vital points. Right now she seems intent on protecting her upper body, so I should go for the nerve systems on her legs to shut it down, and then theoretically go for her jaw or temple with a hook.

Humans are not without their vital points. She is no exception.

.....

I see, so you must've taken those hits somewhat on purpose with the intent to get used to me, huh? Amasawa smirks as she dodged another combo of punches, slipping past, and trying to counter with a body shot, to which he spun around and tried to hit her with a backfist--

His attacks have become just as relentless as hers.

Minute 9.....

Oh.... seems like time is almost up. Amasawa's smile disappears.

Oh well, I had fun playing with you. But unfortunately I have to end this.

Amasawa switches footing mid-parry and begins assaulting Beryl's guard with a flurry of short and concise jabs. Beryl raises a brow, noticing the sudden change in movement, but before he could think of a way to adjust, Amasawa aimed a heavy kick straight to his knee.

!!!

it brought him down, but Amasawa didn't stop there as she threw a knee uppercut to his jaw.

" Agh!" Beryl recoils backwards, landing on his bottom as he looks up at her with a bit of confusion. Those moves just now were extra fast than what she'd been throwing at him....

Don't tell me...

No there was no mistaking it. Beryl is sure that this entire time, she had been purposely holding back.

.....

" Beryl...?" Ruby gasped when Amasawa landed that nasty knee upper cut onto her brother.

Something feels different again..... that woman's smile is not like before. Ruby realizes it too.

Beryl gets up slowly, rubbing his chin to try and soothe the pain, but the momentum has changed-- no, it had stopped altogether as Amasawa stood there with a different smile than before.

" You did well. You've truly impressed me." She applauds him. " You even managed to land a few good hits on me! So congrats, haha!" she laughs again.

Beryl furrows his brows. The unsettling shift messing up with his earlier flow.

Amasawa stops clapping and sighs.

" Though.... you didn't seriously think that was me at my best, right?" Her smile disappears completely, and replaced with a thin line. " I wasn't taking you seriously, you know. If I did you would've died within the first minute for sure." She shrugs nonchalantly.

" Still, my praises to you for keeping up with me even at my casual pace. You made things quite fun for me."

Minute 10.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Eh? What did she set an alarm for? Ruby wondered.

Beryl watched as Amasawa raised the sleeve of her hoodie to glance at her watch. She uses one hand to reset the timer.

She returns her golden gaze to him.

" What a shame....I was going to try and use my maximum strength to test you if our play time could last longer. But.....hey," Amasawa takes out a vial from her pocket. " I guess this is why people normally go on a spiel about time being precious."

What the hell is that? Beryl squints his eyes to try and take a good look at it. It was a small cylinder glass containing a translucent blue liquid. He watched as the older woman shakes it for a bit while humming.

She unclips something from the top of the vial, revealing a sharp needle-- turning the vial into a syringe.

" I'm sorry I can't fight you with my full strength. Really, I am." Amasawa grins before guiding the needle to her neck. " But how about I compensate you for it? Instead of fighting me at my full strength..... how about you fight me at my *max potential* instead? "

Beryl's eyes widened at that. Is she being serious? Her ' max potential '?

She drops the syringe on the ground after she had injected herself with it.

This isn't good..... we have to move!

" Ruby, run away now--"

Crack!

" Tch!" Beryl felt a sharp pain bursting from his arm. His body has reacted instinctively before he even realized Amasawa had launched an attack. She tried to kick him while he wasn't looking, rushing at him within a blink of an eye, to catch him off guard.

She retracts her leg and eyes him with a manic grin.

Beryl looks at her and notices the veins that were straining from her neck and the sides of her head. Her golden eyes were sharper than before, simulating that of an actual predator. And her kick....

I can't.....move my arm...? Beryl thought in disbelief as he looked down to his right arm attempting to move it.

It didn't take him long to realize that she had broken it with one kick.

" B-Beryl! Let's run!" Ruby tries to tell him, sensing the entire situation has flipped over its back. Amasawa didn't seem.... *normal*. I mean, she was never normal in the first place, but now she seems like an entirely different person from before!

" Ruby--" Beryl tries to utter his response, but he was caught in a flurry of punches by Amasawa. He successfully parries like before, and slips by a few, before then landing a good hit to her cheek with a good hook from his left.

But Beryl looks on in even more surprise when Amasawa simply turned her head against the force of his punch, showing him the amount of strength she had gotten from that vial. Just what drug is that? He wanted to ask, but this was not the time. Amasawa grins wider before connecting a devastating gut punch right back.

Beryl immediately coughed up blood, the sheer force was unlike

anything he's ever felt before. He felt his eyes become blurry from a singular punch. This.... This isn't normal at all. He's never even felt something like this back when he was still in the White Room. It must be because of that thing she's injected into herself--!

Amasawa followed up with lightning quick palm strikes straight to Beryl's chest, cracking his ribs and risking a collapse-- but the main intention being to bring him back to his ragged breathing from earlier. Except this time it has raised itself on the scale exponentially.

Beryl coughs up even more blood, staining the concrete pavement, before staggering back a few good meters and collapsing entirely.

Ruby watches in horror as she watched her brother bleed. She could hardly say a thing, the shock was too incomprehensible at the moment, she was simply frozen even more so than before.

" S-Stop it!" She yells, and Amasawa finally turns her head to her.

She grins.

Amasawa turns on her heel and begins wordlessly approaching Ruby. The latter steps back a bit, was she finally going to kill her now? No. No she can't. She's scared. Please. Please don't--

But a pathetic tug on Amasawa's sleeve caught her attention. The magenta redhead turned to face Beryl, who was barely standing, yet stubbornly clutching onto her with a pathetic grip compared to before.

" Where do you think you're going....." His golden brown eyes stare at her, without fear. " Our ' game ' isn't over yet."

It turns out he was clutching her with his broken right arm. He

was willing it. Amasawa watched unimpressed as he was ready to punch her with his left arm-- she intercepts, forcefully bringing it down, and bashed his straight at the nose again. Releasing more blood.

Despite all the damage he's took. Beryl still remains in his stance.

.....

I can't see.....it's so damn blurry....

I can hardly even breathe.... only taking in a few short gasps to keep me going....

His face was stained with forced tears mixed with his blood. All he could see was a red world now.

Damn it.... to think she had something like this up her sleeve.... there's no time for me to study it....

My body wants to give up....

Oh how tempting it is so surrender. His body is screaming for his surrender. But his heart....his mind....

I have...to stall....

Give Ruby enough time....to snap out of her fear....and run....

Stall enough.....till....

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

Even as he was being ruthlessly toyed with by the new Amasawa, all he could think about was Ruby at the moment.

.....

Beryl..... why...?

Why did you fight her?

Why did you fight for me?

Her eyes began to grow heavy. Just like his.

This is a nightmare....it has to be....

Please....wake me up....

But it is reality. What she's seeing now, is without a doubt, what's actually happening. Her brother being beaten to a bloody mess.

They locked eyes, only for a moment, she could barely even see his eyes anymore. But she could tell what he was trying to say.

' Run.'

And so she starts running.

There's no point in standing still while he's being beaten like this.

I have to find help.

I have to help him somehow!

SAVE HIM SOMEHOW!

As her feet began whisking her away, she lets the tears run down her face as she wonders why she's running when her brother is getting hurt. When her brother is about to be killed before her. Just like their mother, he was now being pummeled to death by some stranger they crossed paths with! Why does this have to happen to her, happen to him?!

What did they do to deserve so much pain....

Stop...Stop crying, Ruby....

Keep running...

Look for help..... I can still save him....

And she finds that stranger. She immediately begins yelling.

" P-Please! Save him! Save my brother! He's in danger-- he's going to be killed! Please send help!"

She yells....and yells....

The stranger quickly nodded before calling up a number on their phone. A moment of relief washes through her clenching heart, maybe she found help in time, maybe they could--

.....

" Ruby.....what are you doing....?"

It was a lie..... I'm sorry.

" I....I can't.....I'm sorry....but I can't leave you..." She said through her choked sobs.

Standing between Beryl and Amasawa was none other than Ruby herself, with Beryl lying on the floor behind her. Her body had acted before her mind could.

Its instinct was to protect her little brother at all costs.

It aligned with what she truly desired from her heart.

" Stop...." Ruby pathetically sobs as Amasawa approached them. " P-Please.....stop hurting him.....leave Beryl alone....please...."

Amasawa gets nearer.

" Please....you can hurt me....kill me even...!"

Beryl's eyes widen at that.

" Just...please....let my brother live...."

More tears drop to the ground. Her expression was scrunched in desperation, her limbs trembling, her brows creasing, and her eyes simply wouldn't stop crying. She was scared, sure.

But not for herself.

For him.

Beryl comes to the realization that he often forgets Ruby was there that day too. She watched it happen. The way their mother was stabbed, bleeding out, dying on the ground, yet still giving them warm hugs. She was there.

Ruby is fighting in her own way.... so that it doesn't happen again. Even if she's begging with her head against the floor. Crying and sobbing. She....

Amasawa suddenly stops, taking in the scene before her.

This...

She stares silently at the way Ruby was pleading for her to spare her brother's life.

A familiar scene begins to cloud Amasawa's mind at the moment....

Why does this....

Her psychotic smile remains like a statue....but...

.....

Ruby, through her tears, suddenly spots a couple of water droplets splash on the ground. *So it's raining huh*, she thinks sadly. Even the gods were mocking her and her brother....

But then she notices how the water droplets came consistently....but not spread out.

Not like how rain should....

But if it isn't rain then...

Ruby slowly looks up, and she gasps in shock.

Is she....

Crying?

.....

" No, this is....why am I..." Amasawa reaches a hand to feel the liquid that'd been pouring itself down her cheek. " Crying? No, I shouldn't be....I'm already....!"

" Stop it. Don't be fucking reminded of it!" She suddenly yelled,

both of her hands furiously wiping away the tears. " This isn't the time! You're supposed to be over it already-- It's been *years*, damn it!"

She seemed to be having a breakdown. Whatever just happened to turn her into that, Beryl assumes it was partly due to the effects of whatever she injected into herself. It could be amplifying her already manic behaviour to new heights.

Ruby quickly glances at Beryl and silently moves over to him.

" I...I don't know what's happening but..." Ruby said through her own dried tears. " L...Let's run..."

Beryl weakly nods. Ruby wraps his good arm around her and tries her best to stand up, supporting his weight but--

" Don't you fucking leave."

The blonde freezes in horror when Amasawa, for the first time, spoke in a horrible tone.

Ruby looks at her, and she was met with a fierce glare that could kill.

" The two of you....why do the two of you remind me..... OH TO HELL WITH IT, I'LL KILL YOU BOTH!" Amasawa laughs maniacally before she continued her pace towards them, even with the tears rolling down her face. It was a disturbing sight to see. Like a monster straight out of a horror fiction.

" N-No! Beryl, cmon, let's hurry. I know it hurts to move but--"

" No...."

" S-Stop it! Don't try to argue with me, this isn't the time--"

" Don't worry..... we did enough.....we stalled enough..." Beryl says.

Ruby was confused. " W-What? Stalled for what--"

" Not ' what '. It's ' who'." Beryl begins smirking, even with a bruised lip.

Who the heck are you talking about--

Fwip!

Thud!

" H-Huh...?" Ruby could've sworn just heard a--

" W-What?!" She squeaked in surprise when she turned around only to find Amasawa's unconscious body lying on the floor, with some sort of dart that pierced her neck.

" Took her long enough..." Beryl's eyes began closing, he was beginning to lose consciousness.

" Her...?" Ruby mumbled.

With the last bits of his consciousness slipping from him, he at least answers....

" Yeah..... she's an old friend of mine."

Beryl's body goes completely limp after that, the sudden weight made Ruby yelp and struggle as she tried to use whatever strength

she had to lift him-- but they only end up falling to the ground together. She at least tries to protect his head from the ground though.

An old friend...? Beryl do you mean she's also from--

" Are you two alright?"

The voice of a firm woman quickly shakes Ruby out of her thoughts. When she turns her head to meet the person who had just saved them, she was met with a comforting but strong purple eyed gaze. Her dark blonde hair sways with wind as it passes, and several men were behind her investigating the area.

Wait...isn't that...?

" I am Detective Sagami Yuki. I'm sorry for not arriving sooner."

~~~~~ Chapter End ~~~~~

Omgggg i actually did this all in one day. Crazy. I didn't think I had it in me but.....I guess I was feeling super motivated to write one of the scenes I've been dying to write, huh?

8k word count in a day! Wohooo

Sorry if my skills in writing a fight scene is not that good. I've never been really confident in that sort of thing, but I feel that i've tried my best here. And I hope it reaches to u too.

Did the fight go how you expected? And yes, Imma just state it right here and now that if Amasawa went full power (

without the injection ) from the start. Beryl would've been STOMPPPPPEEEEDDD.

I quite enjoyed writing him getting beaten up lol. It's been on my mind for like....months. I've always kinda had a dislike towards how Kiyo is written to be so stupidly OP in canon that it's hardly even realistic anymore ( this is my opinion fr ) because it kinda takes away any growth he'll ever need. Both physically and mentally.

This is why I love writing fanfics. It gives you this sort of freedom to write a character and have him/her suit to your tastes. Even if some others dislike it. But thats how it is when you write a story. You face criticism with how u do things and u just gotta deal with it. Learn as u go, yk?

Fun fact about this fight: This will prolly be more interesting to those readers who have read through my other fic ' Last Elite Standing ' but i also had this Kiyo vs Ichika fight scripted for it somewhere down the line in year 2. It haunted me for months since I got it. And writing it here, with its own version suited to this fic, gave me quite the closure hehe. I wont spill too much details about how the LES Kiyo vs Ichika fight would've gone down cuz its irrelevant so moving on~

If you guys are interested in reading a reaction of Goldenberyl series, then do check out @BlueNightOwl0528 for that! She's asked for my permission and I granted her that. She's covering the prologue oneshots series first, so its gonna be slow, but dont try and pressure her alright? Let her write at her pace. ( Link: <https://www.wattpad.com/story/358575021-cote-reaction-goldenberyl> )

Same way that you guys mostly dealt with my updating like once a month--

Ahem.

Anyways....

Question (s ) of the chapter: Why did Amasawa plan to attack anyone in the first place? And between her and Yuki,



who would win in a fight? ( again, answer only if you'd like to!  
)

I'll see you guys in the next chapter! It's going to be pretty long so yeah expect to see me in a month or two after this lmao.

And i hope u dont mind but next chapter is going to be Yuki-focused. ( I love writing her scenes second to Hoshino sibling scenes ) it will cover the events Yuki went through before arriving to Ruby and Beryl

See you then~!

Next Chapter: A Rotten Desire.